

BLESSED BY THE FAE



FAE-BLESSED
BOOK ONE

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To the girls who couldn't put their books
down long enough to live in reality.

To the boys who chased them but never
measured up to their fictitious boyfriends.

CHAPTER ONE

The Tree

I ONLY HAVE, like, 3 seconds to make a decision as he launches the throwing star at me. Pivoting on one heel, I dodge and parry, the star glancing off the flat of my blade.

Laughing with glee, I turn to Dimitri, my combat trainer, and say, “That’s seven. Shall we go again?”

Shaking his head at me, he replies, “I don’t know why Her Majesty insists these lessons continue. It’s not like there’s much more I can teach you.”

“A queen must know battle in order to direct it,” I say in my best impression of my mother.

“Right, well, I think we’re done for the day. You’ve thoroughly exhausted me, my lady.” He bows at me and then offers me his arm. Taking it, I kiss him on the cheek as we turn and start walking back, our footsteps muffled on the manicured grass of the courtyard.

“Not here, my lady. The entire guard is practicing in the courtyard. You know why we must keep this a secret.” My love gives me a stern look, motioning past the bubbling fountain to the few dozen royal guards running through their combat maneuvers.

Boy, don’t I know it. If my father, the king, found out I was romantically involved with my combat trainer, Dimitri would either be exiled or executed.

No, Father’s plans for me are to marry some old king of a neighboring land to “dutifully usher in a peaceful uniting of both kingdoms.” Those were his exact words.

I haven’t met the ruler of Sylvidra, but it’s rumored that King William is old, fat, and no longer fit to rule. His kingdom lies on the northern border of ours, and since it’s so cold, they rely heavily on imports for food and other necessities. The only impressive thing about the country is its military, which is why Father wants me, his only daughter, to broker peace.

I'm nineteen and nearing the age that no one will want to marry me. Whenever father has brought me a suitor, I've driven them off because I only have eyes for Dimitri.

Eventually, something will have to give. Father is becoming suspicious, but he doesn't know what I'm hiding. If he watches too closely, he will see how much time I spend with my love and figure it out.

"Run away with me," I say to him, not for the first time.

"You know the entire kingdom would be at our heels, Shayna." Dimitri sighs. "I would love nothing more than to escape with you, change our names, and start a new life. But your father would not stop searching for you until the day he died, long live the king."

"We could travel to the land of the fae and live among them. Father would never expect me to go there, not after..."

I used to have an older sister. Her name was Serena, and she was first in line for the throne, assuming she'd marry. On the night of her eighteenth birthday, when she reached the age of majority, we heard her scream. By the time Mother and Father rushed to her room, she had disappeared from her bed without a trace. The only thing we heard after that was the tinkling of fae laughter and the sound of a bell. I was twelve.

It was maybe a year after that when my younger brother, Philip, was born. Now he's six. When he's a little older, we will tell him about Serena, but he's too young to understand right now.

Dimitri interrupts my thoughts as he says, "That's way too dangerous, Shay. The fae are extremely fickle, and they'd curse you as likely as they would bless you. Even I don't know if I could protect you there."

"I don't need protecting, Dim," I say, using the nickname that annoys him so much. The thought of needing protection is one of my pet peeves.

Raising both hands in surrender, he says, "No, no, of course you don't."

That's what I thought.

We've made it to the castle. We have a secret spot we go to when we want to be alone; it's in an abandoned wing of the castle that only the servants enter for cleaning once a week.

There's a room there with a library of forgotten books, and that's where I'm leading us.

Seeing where I'm guiding us, Dimitri says, "Her Majesty will be expecting you, my lady. Do we have time to go there right now?"

"My mother is always expecting me. But I want to show you something I've discovered. It will just take a moment."

I can hear him mumbling something under his breath about it being his head on the chopping block and not mine.

Pushing open the grand marble doors, we enter the forgotten library. The entire room smells of parchment and ink. Books of various size, shape, and color fill floor-to-ceiling shelves on the walls of the two-story room. There are other bookshelves scattered throughout the center of the room as well.

I walk to one bookshelf on the wall. "Watch."

Then I run my fingers over the leather tomes until I find the one that feels harder than the rest. When I tug on it, I hear the click and the grinding. To my left, a portion of the wall opens to reveal a passageway that descends into darkness. The damp scent of mold and earth drifts up from below.

Dimitri stares for a minute before asking, "How did you discover this?"

"I spend time in here exploring the books while you're not here, you know." I flash a mischievous grin at him. "Don't you want to see where it goes?"

Shaking his head at me, he makes an "after you" gesture, and I lead him toward the passage. I didn't go in here by myself when I first opened it, not knowing what I would find, but I made sure to leave a torch in here for when I would come back with Dim.

Feeling a wave of curiosity, I light the torch, and we enter.

Inside, the ground slopes down for several hundred steps until the passage opens into a grand cavern. There are unlit sconces spaced evenly along the stone walls. But what's most interesting about the room is what's growing in the center: a living tree of solid gold, thriving despite the lack of sunlight and water.

And that's when I see it. And the thing in the tree sees me.

* * *

It has the most beautiful countenance I've ever seen. Its hair is long and gold, like the tree. When the faerie looks up at me, I feel frozen by its beauty.

Dimitri is similarly frozen beside me.

The faerie, at first, says nothing, but then it beckons us closer with one finger. We feel a compulsion to approach the creature.

The fae are known for their ethereal beauty and long, silken hair, so it's hard to tell whether this is a male or female. But as we get nearer, we can see it even more clearly on its perch on the lowest branch.

Its skin glistens like gemstones in the light of my torch, and its eyes are silvery. It has long, lean limbs and a small frame, and when it speaks, it sounds like a waterfall flowing over rocks. Aside from the otherworldly qualities, it could pass for an extremely attractive human.

"Welcome, Shayna De Marco and Dimitri Furor. I have been waiting for you," it says.

"Who are you?" Dimitri asks, sounding dazed.

"I am the guardian of this tree. I have many names and none. Since the king made his bargain with Queen Ash have I waited here for the outcome of the deal made long ago. Namely, I have waited for you, Shayna."

"What bargain?" I say, sounding just as slow and stupefied as Dimitri. "My father would never make a deal with the fae."

"Ah, yes. Well, on the contrary, he did." The faerie blinks slowly at us, its expression unchanging. "Your father's greatest

shame was his inability to produce offspring. His kingdom was in peril without an heir, so he sent for help from the realm of the fae.

“Queen Ash took pity on your mother, barren as she was, and blessed your parents with this tree, which, so long as it prospered under the castle, gave them the ability to have suckling babes.”

“That’s preposterous!” I exclaim. “Father only speaks of how dangerous the fae can be.”

“Consider if you were curious enough to seek out a faerie. Being fae-blessed as you are, his secret would be out as soon as a faerie recognized you for what you are: a fae miracle. Is it any wonder that he should warn you away from the fae?”

The creature in front of me makes a lot of sense, but one thing presses on my mind.

“So, why are you waiting here for me?” I ask.

“Queen Ash is dying because the fae realm is dying. The fae have not been true to what is natural, creating a myriad of abominations, and Queen Ash is seeking a human to restore balance in the land.”

“You’re saying that’s me.” This is ridiculous. Until now, my biggest worry was how not to marry an old king, and now some mysterious fae queen needs my help? Should I believe anything this faerie says? The fae are known to be tricksters. “What would she even need a human for in the fae realm?”

“The fae-blessed carry dormant abilities, and it is those such abilities that will cure the queen and the blight on the land.” The faerie pauses. “If you do not do this, and the realm of the fae dies, then this tree dies because it is tied to the magic of the realm. And if this tree dies, you and your brother will die.”

“So, basically, I have no choice. What do you say now, Dimitri? Wanna run away with me?” I laugh humorlessly.

“I’ll follow you anywhere, my lady.” Dimitri puts his fist over his heart.

“Shayna?” the faerie says. “Speak nothing of this to anyone, or you will face severe opposition. Tell not even your king-father. In three days’ time, someone will come to collect you. Now, your mother is waiting for you.”

With that, the faerie withdraws against the branch and seems to camouflage perfectly with it.

We turn to leave, both speechless.

Find a secret passage into a cavern? Check.

Stumble across a magic tree? Check.

Receive the craziest news imaginable? Check.

Now that I’ve checked off this list of things I didn’t expect for today, it’s time to meet mother for tea.

* * *

When I finally get to the sitting room of the castle, the tea is already cold.

“You’re late,” Mother says.

She’s not alone. With her is a man who looks to be in his late fifties. He’s got a potbelly and sweat all over his back and face, but he wears the richest purple robes. He must be important.

“May I introduce you to King William, ruler of Sylvidra,” she says, inclining her head toward him and widening her eyes at me.

Oh, great. I had no idea this would be sprung on me this afternoon. Giving him a respectable curtsy despite still being in my training clothes, I rise and hold out my hand to him. He gives it a nasty, wet kiss, and inwardly, I shudder.

“My, aren’t you just lovely,” King William wheezes. “A true beauty.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” I say, breathing little and trying not to gag at his stench. He seems nice enough, but physically, he’s repulsive.

He asks me many questions about my day-to-day activities, what foods I like to eat, and whatnot. All I can think about as I answer them absently is the tree under the castle and how much I long to be with Dimitri.

When the sky begins to darken, King William kisses my hand once more and says, "It was a pleasure meeting you."

"There, now, was that so hard?" Mother asks when he leaves.

It takes me a minute to realize that in my distractedness, I didn't try to scare away this suitor. Ever the dutiful daughter, I reply, "No, Mother."

She attempts to fix my hair and pat down the wrinkles in my tunic before saying, "Bah! You shall just need a bath." Turning to the servants, she says, "Draw up a warm bath for your princess."

Mother is always talking to the servants this way. I feel it doesn't engender their respect, but Mother is from a land that treats those without nobility as beneath them. When she married Father for political reasons, she never tried to acclimate to the Feristle culture.

Father, well, he is a man who earns the respect of anyone he meets, which is why the people will do anything for him. Though he treats the servants and citizens with dignity and respect, he still will not approve of his children marrying outside the nobility.

As the maidservant walks away to draw my bath, I think about what it means to rule and what type of ruler I want to be. I try not to think about the fae realm and what awaits me in three days.

CHAPTER TWO

A Banquet

AFTER MY BATH filled with rose petals, a servant dresses me in a fine soft-pink gown for dinner, tying it around the waist with a white ribbon. I wear white elbow-length gloves made of the richest lace.

Father is throwing a banquet to welcome King William to Feristle. I don't know how I'll sit through an entire banquet with so much on my mind. I'm dying to ask Father about this tree and the claim about the fae bargain, but I can't shake the faerie beneath the castle's warning.

As I walk down the hall in my white slippers, passing the elaborate tapestries hanging every few feet, I hear the faint music coming from below. An upbeat tune with a fiddle and a flute makes for dancing music.

In the corridor, several lit torches give the place an exuberant look. The castle feels so alive tonight.

When I reach the grand staircase to the main hall, I stop to take a breath. It's on nights like tonight that I wish I had the options a peasant does. Mandated banquets and catering to suitors is not the life I would choose. Arranged marriages, rather than marriages based on love, rarely fit the narrative of a faerie tale.

When I look at Mother and Father, I see two people who, while happy, are not in love. They have no common interests, come from different cultures, and have contrasting personalities. Mother defers to Father on matters of state, but it's obvious to me she doesn't always agree with him. They are two people who live together without loving together.

That's not what I want for myself. I have something with Dimitri. If I was a simple peasant, nobody could tell me I couldn't marry for love. It wouldn't be a requirement to have an arranged marriage.

Taking the steps one at a time, I steel myself for an inevitable night of boring socialization and stealing surreptitious glances at Dimitri from across the room.

When I reach the bottom and open the doors to the banquet hall, I am greeted by a cacophony of sights, sounds, and smells. There are dancing lords and ladies weaving in and out on the dance floor and servants carrying trays of appetizers, each with their own delicious scents. On the far end of the room, seated at the high table, are Mother, Father, Philip, and King William, who is gorging himself on the glazed hog.

I swallow the bile in my throat as I make my way toward them, scanning the crowd for Dimitri. When I see him talking animatedly with one of the guards, my anxiety eases a little.

A servant bumps into me as a dancer bumps into him, and he hurriedly mumbles a fearful apology.

“Not a problem,” I assure him. “Things happen.”

The servant gives me a grateful look and says, “Thank you, Your Highness,” before scurrying off.

When I finally make it to the high table, Father stands and gives me a kiss on my forehead. He is somewhat inebriated by the mead. “My dear,” he says, “have you met King William of Sylvidra?”

“Yes, Father,” I answer. “I met him this afternoon.”

“You have a lovely daughter, Frederick,” King William cuts in. “I am eager to begin talks of alliance with you.”

The man is my father’s age, and my father is offering me to him like prized cattle.

I lock eyes with Dimitri as he stands by the mead, refilling his drink, and he gives me a sympathetic smile and a roll of his eyes. Man, I love him.

Turning my attention back to our table, I tune in to Philip whining about how he’s not allowed to play with the other children.

“A prince does not have time for useless pleasures,” Mother scolds him. “A prince must spend his days learning how to run a kingdom. You’ll do better watching your father and modeling your life after him.”

“He’s six, Mother,” I say. “And we’re at a banquet. Surely, he has time to play with the nobles’ children, at least for a while.” I wink at Phil as I say this, knowing full well that Mother won’t say no to that in front of our guest, not at the risk of looking argumentative.

She glares at me, but she concedes. “Oh alright, but only for a few minutes, Philip. Then come back here, and continue to learn from your father.”

“Yes!” Philip cheers, running to play with Andrew and Solomon, the Barnaby twins.

But now Mother has her undivided attention on me, and she says, “Shayna, why don’t you tell King William about your studies?”

“Do you mean my foxhunting or my combat training? Both are going really well.” I lay the sabotage on thick, hoping this old king will find my hobbies unladylike and improper.

Mother sighs. She’s used to this. “I was talking about your studies of political law and literature. Could you elaborate some on those?” She gives me a pleading look that says, *Don’t mess this up.*

“Ah, yes. I just finished reading Braxton’s *First Law of Negotiation*. It was absolutely enlightening.”

King William leans forward and says, “And what did you find most interesting about that book?”

“Well, Your Majesty, I especially liked what it said about standing your ground and not being willing to accept less than you can live with.” I look past the old king and give Father a meaningful look. He’s too busy drinking his mead to notice, but Mother doesn’t miss my hint. She kicks me under the table.

“Ow!” I say. Everyone at the table looks at me to determine the cause of my outburst. Mother gives me a glare.

“I bit my tongue,” I say after a moment of uncomfortable silence, with neither of us backing down.

“Hmm,” King William says thoughtfully, ignoring my obvious lie. “That is an interesting thing to take from it. I can definitely see the merit there. One must never make a deal that will cost them more than they’re willing to sacrifice. Splendid.”

Father just stares at his empty glass, but he seems to have decided he’s had enough.

We’ve all eaten our fill except me. I’ve barely touched my food, preferring rather to chase it around my plate.

The dancers have slowed down, having exhausted most of their energy.

That’s when I decide to excuse myself, claiming illness.

Heading back to my room, I decide that going to the fae realm can’t be any worse than this.

* * *

The next morning, I skip breakfast and go straight to the training courtyard. Dimitri is already there, and my, does he look good in armor. His black hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and I can’t help watching in awe as he parries and ripostes an invisible opponent.

“You mind if I jump in or are you gonna do that yourself all day?” I finally call out.

He turns and grins at me, dropping his sword to his side.

If we’re not careful, even our expressions will give us away. Maybe when we’re in the realm of the fae, we can be more openly affectionate.

In just two more days, someone is supposed to come “collect” us, according to the faerie beneath the castle.

I have no idea what Father is going to think if I up and disappear the same way Serena did. I really miss her. Father misses her as well. I know it’s the reason he drinks.

Bringing myself back to the present, I taunt, “Are you ready to get your butt handed to you again?”

“Oh, no,” Dim responds. “I’ve brought a secret weapon, and I think you’re the one whose butt will be ... okay, I’ve messed up this comeback, but you’re not gonna win this time. I’m sure of it.”

“Wanna bet on it?”

“Loser has to fight the next match barehanded?” he suggests.

“You’re on.”

And then he pulls out what looks to be an eight-foot staff from behind the benches, and I know I’m in trouble. With his long arms and agility, there’s no way I’m getting close to him.

I’ve never seen him fight with a staff before and am completely unprepared.

Dodging is the only thing I can do until I see an opening to get in close, and I go for it. I hit him with the flat of my blade and say, “Dead!”

“No way!” he exclaims. “I thought for sure I had you this time.”

We’re both lying on the ground, panting from exertion.

“You’ll just have to try harder next time,” I say after a minute. “And don’t think I’m gonna go easy on you just because you’re unarmed.” I give him a playful look.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he says, standing and helping me up. “Come on. Let’s go.”

We have plans to be alone. Neither of us has been back to the library since we found that secret passageway. It’s just a little too unsettling knowing what’s been down there all this time.

The abandoned wing does have some other private areas, though. Its sitting room is spacious yet cozy. Though the furniture has long been covered with white sheets, which have

accumulated dust over the years, it's simple enough to peel back a sheet and sit on one of the camelback sofas in there.

We sit on the smallest one and discuss recent events.

"Dim, what are we going to do in the fae realm?" I ask. "That faerie didn't tell me much about how to stop the land from dying. And have you ever heard of the term fae-blessed before?"

"I don't think many people know much about the fae, Shayna. In many parts of the world, it's considered a superstition to even talk about them, lest you arouse their ire."

"Well, that's helpful." I sigh.

"Hey, it might not be so bad. It'll get you away from your courtship. And we can be together."

He doesn't say "for now" but I can hear it in his voice. I want to comfort him and tell him that things will work out, but honestly, unless we run away together, I'm not sure they will. There's only so long you can carry on a secret relationship before somebody gets hurt.

I don't think about the fact that my life depends on this trip to Faerie. I'm taking it one problem at a time.

We sit there on the sofa for a few hours, at rest in each other's arms. When the sun starts to set, we head back to our separate wings in the castle.

* * *

The next two days pass slowly, but they pass. It's probably near two o'clock at night when the faerie appears in my room. The smell of damp earth is what wakes me, and when I open my eyes, I see it.

It has silvery hair and softer features than the one under the castle. Its chest is a little more rounded. I'm guessing this one is a female. She's gorgeous enough to make me self-conscious just looking at her. When she speaks, it's like the sound of a wind chime.

"Come," she says. "Spruce is retrieving your lover, and the changelings are waiting to take your places."

I balk at the word lover, but I get up quickly and quietly, throwing on my overcoat and sensible shoes. I slept in a tunic and breeches, so I leave those on.

We meet Dimitri and a faerie who I assume is Spruce near a back exit that leads to the castle gardens. Spruce's forest-green hair matches the hedges outside. I assume he is a male, as he has more angular features and a flatter chest.

We walk through the gardens, smelling the sweet, heady scent of the pink and white roses as we pass. Tulips and sunflowers form intricate patterns on the lawn, and hedges shaped like animals dot the landscape.

Finally, we make it to the castle wall, where the faeries lead us through a secret opening that I thought only the royal family knew of. Waiting for us outside are four fully tacked horses and one pack horse. All of them are a brilliant white.

“Get on swiftly. The journey is long, and we must make haste,” the female says.

We do as instructed, the two fae mounting their own steeds. They take off at a gallop, and we follow, none of us slowing until we reach the city limits. These horses must be some of the fae horses I thought were a myth. They aren't winded at all and seemed to enjoy that long, hard gallop.

When we slow to a walk, I finally ask the female what her name is.

“I am called Amaryllis.”

She doesn't seem to want to engage in much conversation, so I simply mention what a pretty name she has and leave it at that.

We ride on for a couple hours before stopping to relieve ourselves and eat. The faeries brought some sort of berry pudding and salad leaves to eat, and while I started to eat them separately, I stop when I see them spreading the pudding over the leaves and mashing them together.

Shrugging, Dimitri does it too, and when he moans in delight, I decide to try it. It's like a flavorful explosion in my mouth.

“What is this?” I ask.

“It is called *spatkis*,” Spruce says.

“It’s delicious.”

The fae say nothing and just continue eating.

When we have eaten our fill, we get back on our horses and keep going.

“How long until we get there?” I ask. I know nothing about Faerie or where it is.

“There is an entrance to our realm about ten miles ahead.” Spruce seems to be the more talkative one, or at least willing to answer questions.

“Are we going to see the queen?”

“Not at first,” he says. “First, you must meet with the wise woman, Gardenia. She will educate you on our ways before you meet the queen, and she will tell you about yourself. When you meet her, treat her with respect. She does not tolerate any form of disrespect. She is oldest and wisest among us.”

“Okay,” I say. I don’t say thank you, as I know better than to thank a faerie, lest I invoke their ire. But I am grateful he is answering my questions.

We continue on in relative silence until we see it.

The fae in front of us slow and dismount, and we walk to the shimmering barrier between our world and theirs.

All I can think is that I don’t feel at all prepared for this.

CHAPTER THREE

The Fae Realm

LOOKING AT THE barrier between realms is disorienting. The shimmery veil between the worlds looks a lot like something that can't decide what shape or color it's trying to be.

"So, this is it?" I ask the faeries.

"Yes," is all Spruce says.

"Come," Amaryllis grunts, grabbing my hand, while Spruce grabs Dimitri's hand. They both lead us through the barrier. Stepping into the other side is an extremely uncomfortable feeling. It feels like my insides are escaping to the outside of me.

But once we get on the other side and step into the realm of the fae, I gasp. It's like nothing I've ever seen.

Trees with blue and purple leaves are everywhere. The sky is a rich, deep azure, much more colorful than our world, and the air smells earthy but sickly. Insects and creatures I've never seen flit about.

I watch as a brown pixie shakes its fist at a sprite on a tree stump. The sprite sticks its tongue out at the pixie, who then charges the sprite. The two tumble in the grass.

A tall, furry creature with a large body and spindly legs walks by us, paying us no mind, and a herd of tiny, winged animals eats from a cluster of mushrooms of varying colors. Amaryllis forges a path through them, and they part for her with low, indignant bellows.

"Come," she urges. "There is no time."

She leads the way to a lightly trodden path through the woods. When my gaze falls upon a short dwarf with a long beard who beckons me closer, I almost go to him, but Amaryllis yanks me back.

“Stay on the path!” she hisses. “There hasn’t been a human in this wood for millennia, and the beings here will be curious. Not all of them are friendly.” I think it’s the most I’ve heard her say so far.

Making a mental note to resist the magic here better, I turn to follow her. I can’t let the pull of this place cloud my judgment.

We each lead our horses through the wood in single file, Amaryllis in front, myself and Dimitri following, and Spruce at the rear.

The farther we go, the darker the wood seems to get until it almost feels like something is watching us. It sounds as if the trees are whispering, and the forest is too still.

Stupidly, I start to ask what’s happening when Amaryllis gives a slight shake of her head and puts a finger to her lips to shush me.

Both faeries are on the alert. The only sounds we hear are our footsteps and the horses’ as we continue.

Suddenly, a brownie appears before us. He’s short, with a white linen tunic and brown trousers, and he wears a black cap with a goose feather in it. He lifts a shaky finger to point at Dimitri and me.

“Turn back!” he says. “Your kind are not welcome here.”

Spruce utters a low curse in Faerie, the tongue of the fae, before drawing his sword. Though, to the humans, it’s considered a nearly dead language, all the nobility are required to learn it. I may not know all the curses, but I know that one.

“We are on business for the queen. Step aside,” Spruce barks.

Without a word, the brownie makes way for us, but as we pass, he spits at our feet.

I did not know what to expect when coming to Faerie, but I did not expect such a hostile reception. At most, I figured there would be distrust, but outright aggression? I did not plan for this, and I’m unsure how to take it.

We continue on quite a ways until the forest feels a little more lively. Rabbits and squirrels race around the wood, and the trees don't seem so unwelcoming.

Finally, we near a small, wooden hut on the side of a grassy hill. Its lantern is lit above the door, though it is still daylight, and a beautiful garden full of flowers and vegetables in neat rows lies just a few steps to the west.

A red-winged faerie with wispy gray hair bends over a patch of pumpkins, ripping up weeds. When she hears us and the horses approach, she turns, putting a hand over her eyes to block the glaring sunlight.

"My, if it isn't Amaryllis! Come here, child!" she calls.

"Gardenia." Amaryllis puts a fist over her heart and bows in respect.

The two women clasp each other like long-lost friends. When they separate, Gardenia glances over at us with her ageless countenance and says, "Are these them?"

"Yes, *madra*," Amaryllis says, using the Faerie term for a non-relative one holds in as high regard as one's own mother.

The older faerie squints at Dimitri and me, sizing us up. "They don't look like much."

She says it in such a matter-of-fact way that I don't feel offended. Perhaps she's right, and I won't be able to help the fae queen. Perhaps there's nothing magical about me at all. Maybe this is all a mistake, and they'll ship me back to my dreary life, only fit to be betrothed to a fat, old king.

Or perhaps not. I could prove her wrong. Going back to Feristle just to marry King William is not a part of my plan.

If only I could somehow get Father to agree.

"Shayna De Marco and Dimitri Furor, the ones who will save this land from its death. I am Gardenia, one who has been training the fae-blessed for six centuries. It would seem the time has come for me to do so once more.

"All of Faerie knows of the human king and queen who could not conceive and the bargain they made with our queen.

But the queen had Faerie in mind when she blessed your parents.

“Faerie has been dying for some time. Only the fae-blessed have the power to restore that which is lost and to reverse fae curses. Something about the unity between fae magic and flawed humanity brings a power the fae cannot hope to achieve.

“When Queen Ash first saw the blight spreading, she started searching for a way to restore the balance before the problem became too great. Early attempts were unsuccessful. Then your parents came to her for aid.

“You, Shayna, are our only hope, and we are yours. And you, Dimitri, will need to watch out for her. Without you, she can only fail. This is the reason you were born, and this is the reason you are here today.”

Dimitri and I drink all of this in.

This seems like a challenge, but I’ve beaten every challenge I’ve had so far. I’m determined to train and save Faerie because if I can do that, maybe Father won’t think of me as just his little princess anymore. Maybe he will finally consider my will and my voice.

“Okay. Let’s do it,” I say. I’m going all in.

* * *

Gardenia leads us to an elaborate patio behind the house that looks as if it was grown from the ground up. A willow tree grows next to it, lending its branches as shade.

“Have a seat,” she tells us. “I’ll put on some tea.”

She moves rather lithely for being over six centuries old. I wonder how long the fae live. She doesn’t appear to be slowed down by her age.

As she walks away, Spruce turns to us and says, “This is where we shall leave you. You’ll find none who know more than Gardenia. Listen to her well, and you may yet make it here.”

I nod at the two faeries who brought us here, bidding them farewell. Then I turn to Dimitri. “Do you think we stand any chance at accomplishing this?” I ask.

Dimitri thinks for a moment before replying. “I don’t think there’s a precedent for our situation, and if there is, how could we know it? But I am hopeful.”

“Yes, hope. I hope so, too, but hope is just a dream. I agree with you. There is no precedent, and if there is one in our histories, it is a well-kept secret.

“My father never mentioned this, and in all my time in the library, I’ve neither heard nor read of the term ‘fae-blessed.’ Time will surely tell.”

Dimitri reaches across the table to stroke my hand softly. He rubs my wrist in slow circles. By the time Gardenia returns with our tea, he’s melted my stress away.

“Well, now, dears,” she says. “I have a couple nice, hot cups of fae tea. Have you ever had it before?”

“No, ma’am,” we say at once.

“Well, fae tea is fickle. To some, it brings wisdom. To others, it brings somber reflection. There are a hundred different ways it can influence you. And it does not always affect the same person the same way every time. Would you care to try some?”

Feeling it would be rude to refuse, I say, “Yes, please.”

Dimitri agrees as well.

Taking a sip, my mouth is immediately assailed with the most exotic flavors, which are both sweet and tart at the same time.

The next thing I notice is that I’m suddenly very aware of the world and how everything in it has its own life and habits. I think of how each creature has different mannerisms and goals, from the ways of the ant to the ways of the lion. All things are unique and in order.

While I ponder this, I notice Dimitri laughing hysterically. The tea must have evoked great mirth in him.

“Do not worry,” Gardenia says. “The effects only last a few minutes.”

To me, it doesn't feel like it has only been minutes when the tea wears off, but I know it has. It felt like hours.

After we settle, the faerie gives us a small smile and says, “I always enjoy watching someone's first time trying our tea.” Then, in an abrupt change of topic, she says, “Let's begin.”

She smooths out her tunic and looks at me. “There are many things I must teach you. Before we get into the topic of your dormant abilities, we must discuss how to behave in front of the queen. She will likely visit us within a few days, now that word you have arrived will have begun spreading. The trees will have already brought news to the royal city.”

Oh boy. Being a princess has prepared me for meeting most types of royalty, but I'm sure that none of my teachers could have known I would meet Queen Ash herself. I listen intently to what Gardenia has to say.

“While the queen is benevolent, that does not mean she can be trifled with. She rules her people because she has earned the right. Among us, she is the most powerful.

“Even before she was queen, she was unmatched, which is how she rose to power. But since she became queen, Faerie has entwined its lifeblood with hers, figuratively speaking. She and the fae realm are one.

“When you meet her, you will only speak truth to her. And you must choose your words carefully. The queen will punish any perceived treachery.”

I am really not sure what to say to that, so I opt for silence. That doesn't seem to bother Gardenia.

She launches into some more particulars about the queen and the fae court, but it sounds a lot like how any royal court operates, aside from the fact that the queen rules and has no need for a king.

Then she says, “We can start your training tomorrow. You must be tired after your long journey. Let me show you to your rooms.”

She leads us into the hut, and may I say, it is a lot larger inside than it looks from the outside. There are way more rooms in here than I would have expected, and there is even a lower level.

Dimitri and I have rooms right next to each other at the far end of the lower level. He goes into his, and I enter mine.

The bed is made of a perfectly even mess of tree roots covered in moss. There is a nightstand made of oak on either side of the head of the bed. A dresser stands opposite the bed, and a writing desk is against the wall. All the furniture looks as if it has been grown up out of the ground. It's quaint and lovely.

I test the bed out, surprised by how comfortable it is. I'm used to the beds in the palace, but this isn't half bad.

Now that I'm lying here, the events of the past few days catch up to me, and a wave of exhaustion hits. I sure miss Mother and Father, and I wonder how Philip is getting on with the changeling pretending to be me.

My last thoughts are of home as I drift into sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Changeling

THE CHANGELING STANDS in the princess's awful, frilly, too-tight dress and wishes for fae clothing. The fae have no need for corsets or petticoats, not to mention all of these extra layers. The tastes of the fae are simple.

Things are going rather well, though, aside from the discomfort of the lavish clothing. Having studied Shayna for several weeks in the event she would need to take her place, Hyacinth is finding little issue making the others believe she is the real princess. It's almost been too easy. Don't any of these humans know their princess well enough to tell the difference?

As the maidservant finishes dressing her, Hyacinth dismisses her with a nod and turns to look at herself in the princess's golden mirror. She looks ridiculous.

Today, she is supposed to dine with the king of Sylvidra, chaperoned by Shayna's mother. If the princess's words with her combat trainer are any indication, she does not want to marry this king. Hyacinth will have to be careful to balance decorum with distaste in this act of hers.

Alas, it is time for her to go to lunch with the old human king. Putting on a mask of the princess's signature fiery and independent expression, she goes out.

Hopefully, she can do what is needed to get through the next few weeks without alerting anyone to the fact she is an impostor. And hopefully, she can do all this without ruining the life of the princess.

Slowly, she makes her way down the stairs and attempts to avoid tripping over the long, unbearable gown.

* * *

“Okay, now breathe, child,” Gardenia says to me as she puts the withered plant in front of me once more. “Then focus your will on making the flower healthy again.”

“It’s impossible,” I say. “We’ve been at this for hours, and I’ve made no progress. It isn’t working.”

“Impossible is not a word,” she scolds. “Now, try it again. You will get there.”

I close my eyes and concentrate. Then, opening them again, I stare futilely at the wilting baby-blue flower that leans so sadly to the side.

Be well, I think toward it. Bloom.

Oh, it’s useless. Nothing has happened in the last few hours, and it’s not going to. Breathing out an aggravated breath, I stand up and start pacing.

“Are you going to give up that easily?” the old fae asks me.

“I’m not giving up. I just need a break.” I rub my temples against the headache I can feel forming.

“Perhaps you would like to learn the history of the fae-blessed, then?” she offers.

“I would very much like that.” I give her a polite but warm smile.

“Then have a seat,” Gardenia says.

I plop down unceremoniously in the seat next to Dimitri, who is eating a meal of fried vegetables over grains, smothered in a creamy sauce. It doesn’t look like the fae eat meats.

“The fae-blessed were not always around,” Gardenia says. “Eight centuries ago, in the reign of Queen Tulip, the fae were very wicked. They cared not for nature, and they were not true to the bond we hold with it. Many of the fae were young and reckless, inventing new, unnatural evils.

“Queen Tulip imprisoned, exiled, and otherwise punished those who were destroying our peaceful realm, choosing the punishment based on the degree of crime. She sought a solution to the blight that was spreading across Faerie. Early attempts at stopping it were unsuccessful.

“That is when she inadvertently discovered a cure. A human girl had wandered into Faerie, seeking refuge from her evil father, who was using his children for nefarious deeds. The queen took pity on her and granted her a flower necklace that would hide her from him.

“As they stood there, the young girl wearing the necklace, Queen Tulip noticed a lighter wind in the air, one that smelled a little less deathly. The girl touched one of the dying trees to steady herself, and the tree began to turn its natural blue again.”

“So, the girl was the first fae-blessed?” Dimitri asks, intrigued.

“Indeed, she was. Queen Tulip experimented a while with how to recreate the miracle, and she discovered that an act of genuine compassion on humans, to bestow a gift or to aid in some manner, will create the power of the fae-blessed. It cannot be done with selfish motives but must be done with genuine compassion.”

“Makes sense. Love and compassion are sacrificial. They don’t ask anything of you. There is a certain magic in that,” Dimitri comments between mouthfuls. I look at him with such adoration and respect. I’m in awe of the wise things he says sometimes.

Gardenia gives him a small smile. “Exactly, my dear boy. That is exactly the point.” Then she turns to me and says, “Your family, princess, are among the first fae-blessed in about two hundred years. This is a momentous occurrence because in times of great need, the fae-blessed are able to draw upon their power to shape the world. It could even be argued that their power rivals the fae.”

Well, that’s a lot to take in. Power that rivals the fae? What does that even mean? How am I supposed to believe that when I can’t even make this blue flower whole again?

I hold back some rather disbelieving laughter. Wouldn’t want to offend my tutor. I remember what Spruce and Amaryllis warned me about when they told me to respect her.

“Child,” Gardenia says. “If you don’t believe in yourself, you cannot hope to make this work. This power is like a partnership. You work with it, and it will work with you. If you spurn it, well ... you get the idea.”

It’s almost as if she’s read my mind.

My greatest enemy right now is myself. I admit, I don’t fully believe in the fantastical nature of being called fae-blessed. Before all of this, I was simply a princess, even if I did commoner type things like combat training and horseback riding. How can I hope to come to terms with what Gardenia is saying?

Perhaps I need one of Dimitri’s famous pep talks.

“Gardenia, do you mind if we take a break? I could use a reset.” I need to think, and I’m dying to do some exploring.

“Yes, dear, that’s fine.” She waves her hand at us. “Just make sure you don’t go beyond the fence line. There are a million things out there that I can’t protect you from, but while you are within my boundaries, the dangers that lurk don’t dare come close.”

Well, that limits my exploration plans.

“Understood, ma’am.” Dimitri takes my arm and leads me toward the garden, while Gardenia goes inside the hut.

This is the first time alone we’ve had in days, and I feel like I can finally breathe.

“Dim,” I sigh, looking at the begonias. I don’t quite have words for how I’m feeling. There are a lot of expectations on me, and I don’t know if I can do what the people are asking of me.

“You just found out this huge news about your bloodline. It would be hard for me to believe, too. I’m sure you’ll figure things out.” Dimitri always knows what I’m thinking, and he never fails to say just the right thing.

Kissing me chastely, he changes the topic. “But can you believe we’re in Faerie? All the faerie tales we’ve been told growing up, and they were so wrong.”

I laugh in a doleful manner and wipe at a tear that escapes my eye. “Yeah. They really were.”

“How many tales were we told of faeries that eat children in their sleep if they misbehave?” Dimitri leans down and plucks a white and pink lily. He hands it to me, and I inwardly hope that Gardenia will not be offended. It smells amazing.

“I’m sure our parents said that just so we would behave. Nevertheless, I’m glad it’s not true.” Squeezing his hand, I gaze at nothing, deep in thought.

As we stand in the perfectly maintained garden, a pixie flits by and lands on the fence line, coming no closer. Her indigo hair looks vibrant against her violet skin, and her green dress is a nice contrast. She makes silly faces at us before doing a backwards somersault into the bush behind her.

“This place truly is magical.” Dimitri kisses my palm. “Just like our love.”

I blush before swatting his arm. “You are so ...”

“Romantic?”

“That’s not the word I was going for. But you aren’t wrong,” I respond. “I love you, too.”

It’s the first time we’ve been able to openly discuss our feelings without fear of being overheard. And might I say, it’s quite freeing to do so.

“Do you really think I’ll get the hang of these powers Gardenia says I should have?” The doubt has to be written all over my face.

“I know you will, Shay.”

His faith in me spurs me on, and I begin to believe, at least for the moment.

* * *

Queen Ash looks me up and down with such stern, astute eyes.

She arrived in the early afternoon as Gardenia was setting down three bowls of vegetable and barley soup for us. While she greeted the old fae with some warmth, she seems to be

trying to assess us. It feels like we're contestants in a competition for which the rules haven't yet been revealed.

After a long few moments, she turns to Gardenia and says, "They'll do."

Bristling, I look to Dimitri. I don't know how to feel about that remark. Am I supposed to be relieved she likes me? Thankful she thinks we're acceptable? Offended that she even judged us to begin with? Instead, I feel a mixture of all of these, and I don't like it.

My love seems awed by the fact that he stands before the fae queen. We haven't grown up learning much about the fae, but everyone knows the stories of how Queen Ash defeated Fenric, the dragon of Naromere, the southern province of the Old World.

The tales say he was thirty arm's breadths long with claws as sharp as a pike and just as powerful. If they are to be believed, he had emerald green scales as impenetrable as a fortress and fire hot enough to melt metal.

He had terrorized the fae in the southern province for weeks until they were too afraid to leave their homes for fear of being burned or eaten. As often as people died of fire and mauling, they died of starvation, for the crops were Fenric's favorite target, and those brave enough to venture out and tend them fell victim to the fire just as easily as the fields did.

In short, Fenric was a problem without a solution. That was, until Queen Ash—then known only as Ash—showed up. No one before her had succeeded in defeating a dragon. Armed with just a bow and arrows, she stood before him and taunted him.

What Ash said to him varies, depending on who tells the tale, but Dimitri's mother told it this way.

"Come out and meet me, you loathsome creature!"

Fenric answered her with a roar and took to the skies. But that was just where Ash wanted him.

Nocking her arrow, she let it fly, whispering words of encouragement to it. The arrow made its mark in the dragon's

armpit, its most sensitive spot, and down he fell.

Looking at her now, it is hard to picture her as the tales describe her. She wears a plain brown tunic, her hair up in a twist and a sword at her side. She carries a bow on her back and a quiver full of arrows over her shoulder. But she doesn't look strong like a warrior should, even if she has all the necessary gear.

In fact, she looks tired and feeble, and her skin looks stretched over her very bones. If I had to describe her, I'd say she looks sickly. But that's why we're here, isn't it? Because she's dying.

Because Faerie is dying, and by implication, its magic, too.

"Princess Shayna," the queen says, addressing me by both title and name, something few have privilege to do. Those close to me simply call me Shayna, Shay for short. The servants and citizens call me "Your Highness." I suppose, as a fellow member of royalty, this greeting makes sense.

I wait patiently for the fae queen to continue. She takes a shuddering breath before saying, "You look much like your sister."

That confounds me. Did she know Serena? "M-my sister, Your Majesty?" I stutter. I address her as "Your Majesty" out of respect for her higher rank.

"Ah yes. Why don't you sit down?" Queen Ash gestures to the patio table, taking one of the chairs for herself. After I'm seated, she says, "Serena was to be the first fae-blessed to be made heir of a human realm. Unfortunately, on the night of her eighteenth birthday, my servants betrayed me.

"She was to be brought here for training a week after she reached her majority, but on that night, one called Barlow stole into the castle of Feristle and abducted her. He is but fifty-two, quite young for a faerie, but his ambition more than makes up for his youth.

"He captured your sister and brought her to the northern province of Faerie, where he has been using her to corrupt the

blight further and mutate it into something ... other.

“I had hoped that with you here, we might reverse the damage he’s already done. Perhaps, with Faerie cured, we might have strength and power to rescue your sister as well. Barlow has grown much too formidable for me in my current state, and his dark power is too great for the common fae. However, if I were restored, he would be no match for me.”

What can I say to that? My sister is alive? And she’s been the prisoner of an evil faerie for seven years? My heart breaks for her in ways I never knew it could.

Being trained for battle in more than just the physical ways, I know enough about tactics to understand what the queen is saying. If Barlow is too powerful for any of the other faeries and too powerful for her in her current state, it would have been useless to let any of us humans know before now. If my father had learned Serena was held captive, he would have sent an army, only to be destroyed. It was better to keep this a well-guarded secret.

Truly, we need the fae queen at her best, and that begins with me. Training is all the more important to me now.

“One thing is bothering me, Your Majesty,” I say after a time. “How did the faerie in the golden tree know I would be coming?”

“Because of the prophecy of the firstborn and secondborn.” Queen Ash takes a long breath.

“I’ll go fetch us some tea,” Gardenia says, excusing herself.

Closing her eyes, the fae queen says, “Long ago, long before I filled the vacancy of power left by the last fae queen, our prophets foretold of a human pair of sisters born to a barren king and queen.

“As recorded by the scribes, the firstborn would be used for evil, while the secondborn would become the only hope for good. Much of the prophecy is lost to us, but it did make clear that ‘under the castle should the secondborn begin the journey to her destiny.’

“That is partly why I placed the tree where I did when I blessed your parents. I knew someday you would go down there, so I left the guardian there to wait for you.”

This is a lot to take in. I can't begin to process it all. First, my sister, and now some prophecy? My breaths come quicker and quicker.

Seeing the look on my face, the queen pats me on the arm. Dimitri squeezes my hand, but he looks about as shocked as I feel by all of this.

“You look green. Are you alright?” Dimitri's voice sounds far away.

“Take her inside,” is the last thing I hear before the ground rises up to meet my face.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Lake

I WAKE UP confused about where I am. Why am I lying in moss? Why are the walls made of wood? And then it hits me. *Faerie. The queen. My sister.* But how did I end up in bed? The events are a little fuzzy.

I groan and roll over, covering my face with my arm.

“Hey, you’re awake.” Dimitri’s face comes into view in front of me. His sea green eyes are pools of concern.

Blinking up at him, I ask, “What happened?”

“You fainted, so I carried you in here. You’ve been out for a couple hours, and Gardenia’s been keeping the fae queen busy while we were waiting for you to wake up. She wants to see your training.” Dimitri rubs my arm, and it gives me absolute tingles. “Are you feeling up to it? I can tell her to come back tomorrow.”

“I’m fine, I think. Best not keep a queen waiting.” I move to get up, and after the room spins for a moment, I feel much more settled. “Let’s go.”

We make our way upstairs, where Gardenia and Queen Ash are having tea and berries at the oak dining set and laughing over a shared joke.

“Hello, dear,” Gardenia says when she sees us. “You gave us a fright.”

“Yes,” the queen agrees. “But I suppose I did spring a lot on you. For that, I am sorry. I should have been more considerate of your delicate human state.” There is no malevolence in her words. It was stated in the same matter-of-fact way one might speak of a cloudy day or of a fallen tree, and so I find it hard to be offended.

“Yes, well, it was a lot to take in, I guess.” I give a polite smile to the both of them, shoving my embarrassment deep down.

“Would you like to continue with lessons?” Gardenia asks. “I thought we could try something different today.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She claps her hands together. “Good! Come with me.”

We all follow her outside, where she leads us out of the garden gate and toward the wood. We walk down a narrow path until we reach a small lake. The water is clear and blue, but it’s so deep, you can’t see the bottom. The thing that sticks out most to me is that there are no fish in it, nor any insects buzzing above it.

“This lake was once known to grant those who swam in it the ability to change one thing about their fate,” Gardenia explains. “It lost that power decades ago due to the blight. Perhaps you could restore that which was lost. If you do, you may swim in the lake.” She looks at me expectantly, but Queen Ash regards me with what can only be described as a hopeful look.

Wow. Can I do this? And if I do, what would I want to change about my fate? Would I be able to change something about myself to be better suited to help my sister, Serena? Or maybe I could somehow make it possible to be with Dimitri without upsetting Father.

I have so much weighing on me as well, being a part of this prophecy to save the fae realm. Maybe I could use the lake to pass the gauntlet to someone else. Then I could go back to Feristle and ... and what? Be forced to marry King William and lose Dimitri? Maybe I’m better off going through with this prophecy. At least that way, I have a chance to choose who I will be with.

Looking intently at the water, I think, *Return to how you were.*

At first, nothing happens, and I begin to wonder if it’s hopeless. But then a sort of shimmer comes over the lake, and ripples spread out over the surface. I feel a wave of exhaustion, but I smile triumphantly at the success.

“Well done,” says the queen.

“Splendid!” Gardenia remarks. “We may have use for you yet.”

“That was amazing,” Dimitri whispers, gazing at me in awe, and he leans in to kiss me softly. At first, I look around to see if anyone saw, but it’s just an old habit. We’re no longer in Feristle, and we don’t have to hide our relationship here. Then I return his kiss with enthusiasm, and he wraps his hand in my hair.

Placing a hand on his chest, I end the kiss. We are in the presence of Gardenia and the queen of the fae after all. We must show at least some decorum.

Gardenia watches us knowingly, and I blush. “Young love,” she says to the queen. “Don’t you miss it?”

The queen says nothing as a sad look crosses her face, and I have to wonder what loss she is thinking about. Shaking her head, she smooths her face into a carefully neutral expression and says, “I think we may have a chance yet, if this lake is any indication. Would you like to swim in it?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, but I wouldn’t know yet what I would change about my fate. I need some time to think on that.”

The queen looks at me thoughtfully before saying, “Very well.” To Gardenia, she says, “I must return to the royal city. Make them ready, and then send word by the trees. Someone shall return to collect them as soon as I hear the news that she’s prepared to fulfill her calling.”

“Yes, my queen.” Gardenia crosses her arm over her chest and bows to Queen Ash in a gesture of utmost respect. We walk back to the old fae’s hut.

Satisfied with my training, the fae queen gives us each a nod and turns to leave, gathering her horse from Gardenia’s otherwise empty stable. She mounts it in one fluid motion and doesn’t look back as she gallops off. She looks majestic with her pale-blond hair flowing long and silken behind her.

“It’s getting late,” Gardenia says. And it’s true. The sun has begun to set, the pinks and oranges just barely visible

through the trees. “You both should get some rest. Tomorrow, we will intensify your training.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Dimitri and I say at the same time, and we head inside.

Once we enter, Dimitri follows me to my room and sits on my bed. “Come sit next to me,” he says, patting the spot of moss beside him.

I plop down unceremoniously and let out a breath. It’s been an eventful day, one in which I slept a good portion of after passing out. But the training is finally going well.

Dimitri wraps his arm around me and says, “Your father would kill me if he could see us now.”

“Then it’s a good thing he can’t,” I tease, leaning into his shoulder.

“Do you think the changelings are having any luck impersonating us? I often wonder what’s going on back in Feristle.” He rubs slow circles into my arm, making it hard for me to think deeply, and I sigh in contentment.

“Who can say? I hope they’re succeeding, but I also wonder whether things are progressing with King William without me there to scare him away.” My brow furrows at the thought.

“That’s my worry, too. If we were to get back and you already be wed, I don’t know what I’d do.” Dimitri kisses my brow.

“I feel the same. Let us hope, then, that I can save Faerie and find favor in the sight of my father. For now, just hold me.”

And so he does.

* * *

Hyacinth has so far managed to convince the humans she is the real princess, but she is balancing precariously on the edge of both maintaining the facade and of giving away the fact that she is an impostor. It could easily go either way.

This afternoon, she'd had to play the part of the dutiful princess combat training, but it's hard to fake a human lifespan's worth of inexperience in battle when you've lived and fought for centuries.

The guards had come around to watch the show, and my, was it a good one. Fighting against Birch, the changeling impersonating Dimitri Furor, is fluid and majestic. Pretending to be slow and human while fighting is one of the most difficult things about the job, aside from the human conversations.

Now, hours later, Hyacinth lets the maidservant bathe her.

She'll keep biding her time, but she is eager for the day she gets a temporary reprieve. For in a few weeks, the true princess will come back to Feristle for a while to keep up the charade. Then, once the humans are content enough that she's "back to her normal self," Shayna will be returning to Faerie to cure the blight.

* * *

As I sleep, I dream of the first time I met Dimitri. Man, I *really* didn't like him.

"Okay," my new combat trainer says, "Now, remember your form, and try to hit me."

Boy, do I want to. I am no good at fighting, which I guess is part of why Father assigned me a combat trainer. Ever since Serena disappeared in the middle of the night, he has been obsessed with keeping his children safe. This is just the next step for me in his plan for my ultimate well-being.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and lunge, letting a roar escape my lips as I do.

"That was good," Dimitri says, easily blocking my attack. "However, you may want to skip the roar next time. It's a dead giveaway."

This guy has too many critiques for me. This time, when I lunge, he's not expecting it, and I'm so thrilled to have hit him that I leave myself open. That's when he counterattacks, knocking me to the ground.

I let my breath out in a puff of air. "I'm never going to get this, am I?"

"You've done well today, Your Highness. That may be the first time you've made contact with me. There's been some real improvement. If you keep at it, I'm sure you'll be fit enough for war." Extending a hand, he helps me up.

"Not that the king would send his only remaining daughter to war." I brush the dirt off my backside. "But it's a nice thought."

"You know what I mean," he says while putting up his sword and armor. His lean muscles flex beneath his tunic as he hangs up his shield. "I think we're done for the day. Tomorrow, we'll work with staves."

Oh joy. Now he gets to beat me with a stick. If he wasn't so ... unnervingly nice, I'd think he enjoys watching the princess fail at something for once.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm used to people being nice, but normally it's because they're trying to get something from me or get close to my father, the king.

But Dimitri doesn't have motive for that. He's already a decorated officer and well-liked by King Frederick. He's risen through the ranks through both skill and merit. So, he has no need to get closer to the king or to gain anything from me, which leads me to believe his intentions are honest.

I'm not used to this.

I've often caught him watching me from afar, usually in fascination, as if I was a puzzle he couldn't quite figure out. It makes me feel vulnerable and exposed, and I'm not sure what to think about it.

In training, he has employed a range of tactics to see what works best for me. I favor the sword, but he says I need to be versatile enough to use any weapon at my disposal. He says there isn't a guarantee that the weapon I'm most comfortable with will be within reach.

I agree, but you won't catch me telling him that. As Mother says, "A queen's compliments to others are few. She exists to

receive them, not to give them.”

She’s right, of course. Yet I can’t help but think that it’s a silly system. As I walk back to my chambers, I wonder what it would be like to forget the rules for a day and whether Dimitri might oppose me if I chose to take him horseback riding tomorrow instead of our combat training.

When I wake up, I’m a little amused by the dream that was more a memory than a dream. I recall how suspicious I was of Dimitri at first. Over time, the suspicion grew into respect, which, in turn, grew into love. Now I couldn’t imagine life without him.

I remember the day he told me I wasn’t like other girls he’d met. I laughed, partly because I figured that much was obvious and partly because his boldness toward me, a princess, was surprising.

“No, really,” he’d said. “Most of the women here have no ambitions except to marry and have children. That’s their entire personality and life goal. But you care more about the next book you’ll read, the next thing you can learn, and the ways you can test boundaries. You don’t subscribe to the standards. I admire that about you.”

What he said was unexpected, but it made me feel appreciated and seen. Mother and Father viewed those qualities as things that need beaten out of me, figuratively speaking. They called them unbecoming for one with a stature such as mine. But Dimitri was the first person to validate who I was.

I believe that’s why I began to fall in love with him.

Getting out of bed, I clothe myself in one of the many impractically restrictive dresses I brought with me. It’s harder to dress myself without a maidservant, but I manage. Barely.

When I make it upstairs, Dimitri and Gardenia are already having breakfast. I see human food for once: eggs and bread with a cheese spread. I feel a twinge at the reminder of home, but I dig in anyway.

“So, princess,” the old fae starts, “I thought we might try out your abilities on the blight nearby. You succeeded with the lake, but this will be the real test. Are you up to it?”

Not really sure if I am, I say, “Let’s do it.”

CHAPTER SIX

The Blight

GARDENIA HAS BROUGHT us to the far side of the wood. The trees are thinner here, and they look gray and sickly, like all the color has leached out of them. A creature like a massive, dark, formless void hangs over this edge of the wood, pulsating and shifting as if unsure which shape to take.

“That, my dears, is the blight,” the old fae says. “It spews its horrendous death over the land and slowly kills that which is good. Its poison rain and mist are like acid that causes the magic to evaporate slowly from everything it touches.

“When someone abandons the natural order of things or perverts the ancient magics, one of these is the result. Some corrupt fae even use them to amass power and steal magic. Every time a faerie denies or otherwise harms nature, the blight grows and spreads. We have no way to fight them. Or rather, we didn’t until you arrived.

“The fae have taken after the humans lately, chopping down trees and building rather than singing to them to shape them into what they want. It’s destructive and messy business, and the forests are suffering for it. The younger fae have lost all respect for the land and its magic, using them both selfishly.

“When the younger fae ignore history and pervert the ancient magics, the land itself rebels. Fae magic is meant to benefit the land, not the fae. The youth have forgotten what is important.

“And then there are those who wish to control the blight in order to become more powerful. They purposely cause it to spread. The more it grows, the more magic of this realm it absorbs. For the blight species now carries all the power it has corrupted. It can barely contain it, as you can see from how restless this one is. This is just one of many of them throughout the land.”

“You speak as if it were sentient,” Dimitri says.

“Oh, but it is, child. It is not just a force, but a parasite, feeding off of our magic and growing its hate. Its thoughts may be slow, but all of them are malice.”

I shudder. “And you want me to come against that thing? How?”

“You must use your fae-blessed abilities.” Gardenia smiles as if it’s the simplest thing.

I huff at her, and she narrows her eyes. I remember the warning about disrespecting her and quickly apologize.

“Don’t dawdle,” she says, choosing to let my attitude slide for the moment.

I look toward the dark, pulsing void and project my thoughts at it, hoping it will work.

Shrink, I tell it, using only my mind.

Immediately, a sharp pain lances my head, and I cry out, dropping to one knee. Something *foreign* touches my mind none too gently.

“Are you alright?” I hear Dimitri ask, but his voice sounds as if he is underwater.

Gritting my teeth, I wrestle with the entity in a mental battle much greater than any physical fight I’ve yet faced. Its cold, awful mind tries its hardest to break mine open and discover its secrets.

Mentally, I imagine an impenetrable wall, and then I imagine a hole in that wall that I direct the entity through, quickly patching it before it tries to enter again.

“That’s better,” I say aloud to no one.

With the wall up, I can see the entity’s consciousness seeking a way in. The consciousness is like a ripple in the air, so subtle that you wouldn’t see it if you weren’t looking for it. I focus on the ripple and think, *Release that which does not belong to you.*

The entity shudders and starts to shrivel up, just as the blight starts to shrink. A vapor oozes out of the void and

covers the nearby trees and grass, which begin to gain their colors back.

“Well done,” Gardenia says. “You’ve passed the test. We may have use for you yet.”

My head still hurts from the mental battle, and the power I used took a lot of strength out of me. I sag against Dimitri, who holds me but addresses Gardenia.

“How can she stand this?” he says, seething. “She’s all but fainted. You’ll not put her through this again.”

“I’m okay,” I whisper, squeezing his arm. “I have to do this. If I don’t, we will have no future. I will die, not to mention the thousands of fae who will die as well.”

“A good attitude to have,” Gardenia remarks. “Especially seeing as how you will need to face many more of these. If we are to stand any chance at taking back the magic that belongs to the land, you must. And the sooner we do that, the sooner we can stop Barlow from gaining any more power.”

I have begun to regain my strength, and, standing fully, I speak to Gardenia. “One must know themselves and also know their enemies if they wish to come out victorious. I am learning more about myself each day, but I know little to nothing about Barlow. What can you tell me of him?”

“A wretched bloke and wretchedly foolish. Would sooner sell out his own kind than consider himself weak. He was never weak to begin with, but his philosophy was to be the best or to not *be* at all. Rather than gaining power through experience like the rest of us, he sought to take it. He exploited the blight in order to fuel his wicked desires.

“It is largely because of him that the blight is so widespread today. Sure, the blame is upon us all, but Barlow took it a step further. Before he began manipulating the abnormality, we estimated we had centuries until the blight could do any real damage. Now that he’s used it and nurtured it like a parent would a child, we barely have twenty years left, if that.”

“What does he hope to gain in destroying Faerie?” I wonder.

“That, child, is the real question.” Gardenia starts walking toward the path. “Come. We’d best be back now. It’ll be dark soon, and it’s best not to be out of my fence line after dark.”

I wonder about that but decide not to ask yet because Dimitri is fuming. I know he worries about me, but somehow I must make him understand that it’s necessary I do this, no matter the cost.

We arrive back at the hut as the sun sinks into the horizon. It was a long walk, and Dimitri barely said a word. I know he’s upset, but I hope it’s not at me.

After we eat, Gardenia says, “I believe you may be ready to go to the royal city soon. Queen Ash has a task for you there. I will let her tell you when you arrive.

“For the next few days, though, we will focus on training you up to fight against the blight. The one you fought then was just a small one. You will need to be much stronger and more skilled before facing the large ones.”

With that, she gets up and bids us goodnight, leaving me alone with the man I love.

“I am beginning to regret this quest, but I know I cannot stop you, nor should I.” He sighs. “I don’t want to lose you. It is as if everywhere I look, there is something that wishes to claim your life, health, or safety. If you do not kill the blight, I lose you. If the blight kills you, I lose you. I’m just worried.”

“I know, love,” I say, rubbing his shoulder. “But my life, it seems, was never promised to begin with. Who knows? I could be chasing the clock, but I’d rather be doing something to fight it than allowing time to run out on its own.”

Dimitri lowers his gaze to my lips, and I smile. Right now, I want to get lost in him, and maybe we can forget our worries for the moment.

* * *

I have spent the last few days training against the influence of the blight. My head is killing me, but I've made some progress. If only it were enough.

So far, here is what I've learned.

One, the blight speaks in feelings and images. If it feels threatened, it tries to influence the mind by evoking fear. It will send various disjointed images not only to communicate, but as a weapon. It will amplify those images by overshadowing your emotions with what it wants you to feel. It's invasive, but I've managed to conquer that.

Two, there is a price to every bit of magic I use, and I pay for it in strength and energy. When I'm not fighting, I'm sleeping or otherwise resting. I'm not sure how I'm meant to do this by myself when it drains me so.

And three, the blight has a few weaknesses. The first weakness I noticed is its hatred of happiness. If I project thoughts of joy and good memories at them, the void-like creatures *really* don't like it.

Also, the blight is weaker during the day than at night. After dark, the storm's power is at its peak, and it lends that power to things that go bump in the night. The evil creatures grow stronger, which allows the blight to feed off of the fear of their victims. It's a perfectly symbiotic relationship. But by attacking in the day, it can be easier to overcome due to its lack of connection to the creatures below.

It hasn't helped me as much as I'd thought it would to know its weaknesses, but I'm learning.

Just this morning, I faced one of the lesser blights. After sending some disjointed images failed to unnerve me, it tried attacking my mind. I just chose to think of fond memories of Dimitri until it recoiled. The battle was on.

Eventually, I was able to use my fae-blessed abilities to cause it to release its stolen power. This left me extremely pale and exhausted, which made Dimitri even more worried than he already was.

He has been asking Gardenia a ton of questions about how he can help me keep my strength up. He's unsure of his part in this, but he knows that if without him, I shall fail, then he needs to have knowledge of how to help me succeed.

Regardless of how he feels, Gardenia thinks I am ready, so she is shipping us off to Careny, the royal city. This will be our last night here with her. Queen Ash has requested we be brought to her castle for further training and an introduction to her troops.

Tomorrow, a carriage will come to collect us. For now, I'm spending some time alone with Dimitri.

"Do you know what one of the things that first drew me to you was?" I ask, leaning into his broad chest.

"I have an idea, but please tell me," he murmurs, kissing the top of my head.

"Your fearless honesty. You told it like it is, even though I could have had you flogged for some of the things you said." I tilt my head to look up at him. He's got a small smile on his face.

"Oh?"

"Indeed," I affirm.

"You know, I was going to say it was how much you liked my jokes." Dimitri gazes deep into my eyes with a mischievous grin.

"As if," I say, grinning back. "Your jokes made me groan at first."

"Uh-huh," he says, not believing me.

"Do you know what made me love you, though?" I continue.

"What?" he asks, stroking my arm to the point I can't think straight.

"It was the little things.... How you would never let me carry my own armor, but you also didn't treat me like I was a

princess to be coddled. You treated me like a woman to be adored, and that was what made me love you.”

Dimitri smiles such an open, inviting smile and says, “But you are a woman to be adored.”

I can’t hold it back any longer. I kiss him with fervor, and he wraps his arms around me. It is then that Gardenia chooses to knock on the door.

“Dinner is ready,” she says.

I groan at the interruption, but I call out, “We’ll be right up!”

Fixing my hair, I slip on my shoes and ascend the staircase. When we are all seated at the table, Gardenia shovels some leafy greens on my plate.

“This is *porchis*. If you see any of this during your travels, make sure to pluck it. It has energy-restoring properties. It’s highly rare, but whether fresh or dried, it can help you. Use it only when you need it most. I figure now is a good time to restore your strength, since you will be going on your next journey in the morning.”

I accept it and try it. It’s bitter, but I can feel the strength it infuses filling me. My headache goes away completely, and I feel like I could run for hours.

“Have you thought any more about what you’ll change about your fate when you swim in the lake, dear?” Gardenia changes the topic.

“I have, but I haven’t made a decision yet, ma’am. Could I come back to swim in it at a later time?”

“Yes, time allowing, my dear. I must say, though, it has been a pleasure to teach you. There hasn’t been a fae-blessed here in a long time, and I’ve felt almost obsolete. You’ve given me new purpose.” The old fae smiles at me warmly and squeezes my hand.

“You’ve been an immense help,” I respond, careful not to thank her and become indebted to her. “I am truly going to miss you.”

“And you as well, dear.”

When we finish our dinner, we all go to bed. It will be a long day tomorrow, for the royal city is very far.

I have no clue what is in store, but I know one thing: I will do anything to help my sister and save my siblings and me from certain death. I am ready.

CHAPTER SEVEN

News at the Royal City

THE HORSE-DRAWN CARRIAGE arrives for us at dawn, and out of it come two heavily armed fae. They are gruff as they grab our measly belongings and usher us inside. One of them drives the carriage, and the other rides with us.

The one inside the carriage has short, barklike hair and brown skin. He reminds me of a tree. He moves about as much as one too.

“What’s your name?” I ask him. He doesn’t respond. “Oookaaay,” I say, drawing out the vowels. I opt to look out the window of the carriage as we ride.

We must have traveled for several miles when we stop to stretch our legs. The two faeries pull out some provisions for us, and as we eat them, I notice they make me feel rather healthy. Any fatigue I may have felt melts away. After we have finished our meals, the taller one who was driving the carriage speaks.

“When we arrive, you are not to address anyone until we see the queen. There have been certain disturbances in the city, and it is best we bring you in unawares.” He gives us a hard look as if to discourage any form of protest.

“Of course,” is all I say. That seems to satisfy him.

“Alright. Then we must depart,” says the taller fae, his long, black hair falling over his face as he moves to stand. He gestures to the carriage to indicate he wants us to enter.

As we leave, I notice the lake that can change one’s fate off in the distance. It’s the last familiar thing I see as we descend the other side of the hill. I take a deep, steadying breath and get ready to face the unknown.

* * *

We arrive at Careny in three unbearably quiet days’ time. The castle wall is thick and high. The only thing that could likely

penetrate it would be a dragon, but they even have spikes on the roofs to deter those.

The city is on a hill. It has a passive defense in that the castle and taller buildings are at the top of the hill and in the center, and the houses and shops get shorter the closer they get to the outer walls. This is something Feristle also does, allowing for archers to defend from the rooftops in times of war.

The carriage doesn't stop when we enter the gates. We drive straight into the castle courtyard instead. It is only then that the gruff fae signals for us to exit.

We are hurriedly ushered into the castle, down the halls, and into a sitting room, where we are told to wait for Queen Ash. Deciding we're safe enough in the castle of the queen, I plop myself into one of the high-backed armchairs and relax.

Once the two faeries leave, Dimitri turns to me. "Sounds like there's trouble afoot at the royal city," he says. "Wonder what it is."

"I'm not sure, but if they don't want us seen, do you reckon it involves us?" I absently inspect the elaborate carvings on the wood of the chair as I speak.

"Quite probable. Let us ask the queen when she gets here."

"Ask me what?" comes a calm, dispassionate voice from behind us.

Turning, we see Queen Ash, and if possible, she looks a little less pale than she did when she visited us at Gardenia's. Her bony features are a little more plump. Her cheeks are flush with color, and her hair is not as lackluster but instead holds a soft shine. She stands tall and straight before us with all the presence and power one would expect from a fae queen.

"We were just discussing why we were brought here in secret, Your Majesty. Begging your pardon, but is there trouble in the royal city?" I put all the polite deference I can into my words.

A shadow passes over the queen's features, and she deflates. "One could very well say that," she mutters. "Barlow

has put a bounty on your heads. They don't know what you look like, but that could easily change. We must disguise you as fae."

Queen Ash paces about the room as she continues. "I had hoped to put you straight into the ranks of my secret enforcers, the warriors I employ to contain the blight and to fight against Barlow and his men. With your abilities, we could have made short work of the plague on our land. This, however, complicates things."

She stops to look out the stained glass window, though at what, I'm not sure. A deep contemplation seems to come over her. "I was hoping to spare you this until I was stronger and more able to do something about it. But time, it seems, will not permit it. Barlow is using your sister to mutate the blight so that it not only steals power but amplifies it.

"He is using her to give himself abilities no one should have, the likes of which we have limited knowledge. If he is not stopped swiftly, he will become too powerful for even me."

"What are you saying?" I ask.

"We must accelerate our plans. I will introduce you to the enforcers. There is time enough for some work before I train you to face off against Barlow. For now, you will not go by Shayna De Marco. You will be called Shaylynn, or Shay for short.

"There is also the matter of your appearance. Not all fae have wings, but they do not have such pale skin as yours, either. There is always a bit of color to them. You will apply this pink cream to your skin two times daily. And you must wash your hair in brambleberry to dye it as well.

"Your wardrobe needs work. The fae do not wear many dresses, and in battle, you need range of movement. We will have tunics and breeches provided for you. You may wear dresses on occasion but not all the time."

Then the queen looks at Dimitri. "As for you, you are not well-known, and your skin is not so pale as to be unable to

pass for a faerie. You'll do."

With that settled, I prepare to change my appearance and meet the enforcers.

* * *

We stand before the twenty-four enforcers, dressed entirely in fae clothes and looking like fae. Nobody suspects a thing. Either that, or they're all aware of who we are anyway. Regardless, the team accepts us and prepares to train us.

"The work is hard and dangerous," Sycamore, the general and head faerie for the enforcers, says to us. "It's unrewarding. When one of the vermin is contained, another one pops up. The queen has informed us you've had some success in defeating these creatures. Once we contain them, your job will be to destroy them. Do I make myself clear?"

A vein throbs in the faerie's forehead as he speaks. A stray strand of his coal-colored hair falls over his left eyebrow, which has a split in it, and his bronze skin glistens with sweat in this hot, dry courtyard. He levels a glare at us with hard gray eyes.

"Yes, sir," we respond, Dimitri readily and me somewhat hesitantly since I am not used to following orders. Well, not from anyone but Mother and Father.

"Good. Then let's begin your blight training."

Sycamore paces back and forth in front of the enforcers as he addresses them. "Men!" he growls out, which I find a little odd because none of them are human. "Show these greenhorns our tactics. Combat maneuver number 304! Release the blight!"

A wall of the courtyard, previously seamless, parts to reveal a hidden chamber behind a grate. In the chamber, under a glowing green net with notches in each knot, is a small blight, quivering in fear. I'd almost feel sorry for it if I hadn't been inside their evil minds before.

One enforcer walks up to it and presses a button on one of the notches, and the net retracts, folding itself neatly into a

square. No longer held captive by the net, the blight creeps toward the opening, at first hesitantly then with all haste.

“Don’t let it escape, men!” Sycamore shouts, spittle flying from his lips like rain. “You know the drill.”

Six of the other twenty-three faeries take charge, one of them grabbing the net, the other five shooting magic crossbow bolts at the blight. Each time a bolt hits the creature, it slows tremendously.

After several hits, it moves at a crawl, and the faerie with the net uses one of the notches to attach it to a crossbow bolt. He fires, and the net expands to cover the blight, which proceeds to sink to the ground in defeat.

“Now combat maneuver 116!” Sycamore calls across the courtyard. “Juniper, explain it.”

With a fae salute to Sycamore, a young faerie with green hair and yellow skin turns to us, his face boyish and his purple eyes kind. “We have learned that the blight hates joy, so we have taken to playing our fae music, which evokes strong emotions of happiness. That weakens it and makes it easier to capture.

“In addition, we condition our minds to ignore the images it sends. While it is captive, let us show you how we bring it under our control.” Turning to the others, Juniper says, “Begin!”

Six enforcers pull out lutes from their packs and begin playing. A high, fast, and enchanting tune fills the air, causing Dimitri and me to smile widely, dazed. I can’t refrain from tapping my foot, and Dimitri, being more human than I, is more intensely affected. He seems to want to approach the players and dance. I have to physically hold him back, which isn’t easy with a man his size.

The blight thrashes weakly under the net with a pitiful whine. When playing timid doesn’t work, it sends awful, chaotic images into our minds. Finally, it ceases its resistance and bows its head at us in submission.

“Hold, men!” shouts Sycamore. Then he turns to me. “Now let’s see if you’ve really got the aptitude to destroy these things. Come forward, princess.” That title tells me he knows who I am, and they weren’t just unaware.

I walk up to him and the blight, nervous. I’ve never done this in front of a crowd before, and it gives me terrible performance anxiety. Closing my eyes, I send my thoughts toward the blight.

Release that which does not belong to you.

I only know it worked by the gasps and cheers. When I dare to open my eyes, nothing remains of the abomination but the net that had trapped it and a faint, white mist that is already disappearing.

A fresh wave of exhaustion hits me, and I sag. Dimitri wraps his arms around me to steady me.

“Yes, I think that will do,” Sycamore says, and the crowd quiets. “That will be all for today. We will set out tomorrow for the Eastern Forest.”

With that settled, Dimitri and I return to our rooms in the castle. I find a maidservant waiting for me in my chamber. She has hair the color of white bark, with the roughness of it, too, and her skin is a deep tan. Her hands are not as rough as her hair, but they are not without calluses.

“Salutations,” she says, curtsying. “I am Petal. Her Majesty has assigned me to you. I am at your service.”

“A pleasure,” I respond, smiling at her.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Highness?”

“A bath would be nice.” It’s relatively easy not to thank her, as mother taught us not to thank the servants for doing their job. Even things like that are still ingrained in me.

While Petal draws a bath in the in-floor tub within my bathing chamber, I investigate some things around the room that I haven’t had time to look at yet. The mirror over the vanity is made of gold with leaves of red and gold wrapping

around the frame. Catching my reflection, I'm stunned to see how much older I look after a span of a few short weeks.

In the corner is a wash basin for washing my face, and to my left is the bed, which is more than extravagant. A four-poster with canopy and the softest fae silk bedding in muted red and gold hues. From the ceiling hangs a silver chandelier with dozens of lit candles.

This place is nothing like home, but at least it has its comforts.

I pick up a comb encrusted with jewels and seashells and run it through my long, blonde hair.

"Your bath is ready, Highness," Petal says behind me, and I jump. She must walk quietly to have snuck up on me like that. "Sorry, Highness. I did not mean to startle you. Will you need help undressing?"

Before coming to Faerie, the answer might have been yes. But since all my time at Gardenia's, I've learned to dress and undress myself without the help of any servants.

"That will not be necessary," I say. "You may go. But if you would, fetch Dimitri in half an hour. I shall need to speak with him."

"Yes, Highness."

With that, she leaves, and I find myself in front of the most amazing smelling bath. It's full of rose petals and perfumes, the likes of which we do not have in Feristle. I could get used to this. I must take too long enjoying it because there's a knock at the door while I'm still soaking.

"Just a moment," I call, cursing myself.

I towel off quickly and answer the door, but it isn't Dimitri. Before me stands possibly the most gorgeous fae I've ever seen, and she has a look of disgust on her face ... aimed at me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Every Rose Has its Thorns

“IS *THIS* WHO’S supposed to be the savior of Faerie?” the unbelievably gorgeous girl snorts, curling her lip in a sneer. “Well, I’m sorry I dropped by. You don’t stand a chance.”

“*Excuse me?*” I ask, incredulous. Crossing my arms over my chest, I continue, “Who are *you*, and what do you want?”

“Oh, you’re excused. I’m Rose, and you’ll do well to remember my name. I’m the queen’s favorite, her most trusted advisor and friend.” She huffs like that should be obvious, flipping her long, shiny, voluminous red hair and glaring at me with her piercing green eyes. “Now, down to business. There are a few rules while you’re here in the castle of Careny. One: my word is law. You’d be wise to do as I say. If you can do that, we’ll have no issues.

“Two: don’t try to upstage me. I am and always will be Queen Ash’s favorite, and I’ve gotten to where I am by destroying the competition. If you so much as breathe in her direction, I’ll end you.

“And three: stay out of my way. Seems simple enough, doesn’t it?”

“What in the world is the matter with you?” I ask, ignoring her tirade. Her eyes narrow at me. “You can’t talk to me that way. I’m a princess.”

“Not here, you’re not, sweetie,” she says venomously. “And I can see I’m going to have to pay *special* attention to you during your stay. Watch your back.”

She spins on her heel and leaves, sashaying her curvy little hips as she goes.

What was that all about? I wonder. I’m still standing there in shock under the open doorway when Petal walks up with Dimitri.

Seeing my expression, Dimitri asks, “What’s wrong?”

“I believe I’ve just met the cattiest woman to ever exist.”

A look of nausea crosses Petal’s face, and she whispers, “I can’t believe the she-dragon had the nerve to come here.”

“That pretty much describes her. I guess you know who I’m talking about, then.”

“Rose. Everyone’s afraid of her. Nobody wants to cross her, but I’d love to see her taken down a notch.” Petal says it in hushed tones, as if she doesn’t want anyone to overhear.

“I’m lost,” Dimitri says, looking from me to Petal with a puzzled expression.

“Rose is a vile, stuck-up, self-important faerie. If she came to speak to Her Highness, and if Her Highness made a poor impression, the hag will only cause problems for her,” Petal explains.

“Lovely,” Dimitri mutters.

“Highness, would you like me to leave you and your companion alone?” the maidservant asks timidly.

“Yes. That would be quite alright,” I reply, hoping that rumors don’t spread of anything licentious. I only plan to talk with Dimitri. He and I have never gone very far down that path for fear of the repercussions. We speak often of running away together, where no one knows us, and nobody would think twice of us marrying.

“Very well, then. I shall leave you two alone. If you should have need of me, ring the bell in your room, and I shall come quickly.” The young fae curtsies and turns to leave. I incline my head to her in acknowledgment and turn to Dimitri.

“Come in. We’ll need privacy to talk.” I step back to let him into my chamber, and his eyes widen when he sees it.

“Wow. They really gave you the special treatment. My room doesn’t look half as extravagant.” He runs a hand along the vanity.

I shrug, which Mother would say is unbecoming of a princess. I can see her face now. If she knew I had a man in my room, she would faint.

“I think we should talk about Queen Ash’s expectations and my sister.” I sit down on the bed, and Dimitri sits next to me. If mother could see this, she’d not only faint but have a heart attack. “Just how long does the queen expect me to work for her? At what point will enough of the blight be destroyed? When can we save my sister? What condition could she be in after all these years of captivity?”

“All very good questions. I think we should ask Queen Ash. But let us wait until we’ve done a little more. She did say that as the blight is weakened, she and Faerie grow stronger. And she said she cannot defeat Barlow in her current state.” Dimitri pushes a stray strand of hair out of my face as he talks low. “As far as your sister goes, I don’t have an answer to that. It has been a long time. I won’t lie to you. She could very well be too far gone.”

I sigh. That’s not what I wanted to hear, but it’s what I needed to hear.

“It’s just ... everything feels outside my control right now, and I wish I could do something about all these issues.”

Dimitri rubs circles on my back. “I know, Shay. I know. You are doing something, though. It’s just going to take time.”

* * *

We decide to stroll the castle courtyard to get away from it all, so I rub some more pink cream on my skin in order to look more like the fae, and we head out. The moon is bright and full against the night sky, and the stars twinkle like a million fireflies.

Arm in arm, Dimitri and I admire the beautiful and expansive castle gardens, where faeries bustle about among the flowers, helping them grow. The heady, sweet-smelling scents envelop us as we stroll, and the beauty takes my mind off things, if only for the moment.

In the morning, we will go to the Eastern Forest and bring down one of the blights that's been plaguing the land. I'm not sure how well our team will work together, but if it's my only shot at saving Serena, I'm taking it. The thought of saving her is what keeps me going when the future is as uncertain as it is.

I'll see you again, my sister. I will find you. Mark my words.

* * *

We wake at the crack of dawn. Fog curls off of the ground in waves, and beads of dew cover every blade of grass. It makes for an eerie feeling.

Today, we are supposed to go to the Eastern Forest and battle the blight. But there's something unnatural about this mist, something that chills the very bones. I can't quite place it.

Nevertheless, it is duty that binds me. I apply my pink cream to my skin and dress myself, hoping that my fears are unfounded. Then I exit my chamber in search of Dimitri. I find him in the dining area, eating cinnamon honey cakes.

"My lady!" Dimitri says when he sees me, and he stands to greet me with a chaste kiss on the lips. We're still avoiding too much public affection. If we get in the habit of it, it could be disastrous when we return home. We wouldn't want to accidentally forget our situation and betray our true feelings for each other.

"Hello, Dim," I respond, grinning. "I see you found the desserts." The man cannot resist his sweets.

Between mouthfuls, he manages to retort, "A little sugar never did anyone any harm."

"Vincent St. Leopold ate three cakes a day, and look how he turned out."

"I'm not eating nearly that much nor that often. Would you like one?"

"If I ate sweets as much as you do, even as little as you claim you eat, I'd never be able to keep up with you in combat

training.” I opt for a lighter meal of fruits and oats, knowing that I don’t want to be too drowsy or full on this expedition. I’ll give myself no opportunity to be slowed down.

“So, you admit you need an advantage over me?” Dimitri gives me a playful wink.

“That’s not what I said, and you know it.” I narrow my eyes at him in mock annoyance.

“Never hurts to try. Battling you is like climbing a mountain that has no end. You’ll never stand on top of it, but you’re always looking to reach its heights.”

“That may be one of the nicest things anyone’s ever said to me.” Touched, I can’t stop my smile at his compliment.

“And it’s true. You know I’ve never sucked up to you. The student has truly surpassed the teacher.” He takes another bite of cinnamon honey cake and continues with his mouth full. “I remember when I was first assigned as your trainer. You were hopeless.”

“Don’t remind me,” I groan, remembering how many times I ended up on the ground, staring up at him after he successfully countered my feeble attacks. It wounded my pride every time. “Are you almost done?” I finally manage.

Stuffing one last cake into his mouth, Dimitri mumbles, “Let’s go.”

We gather just outside the castle, ready to face the blight over the Eastern Forest. I’m told this one is one of the more mature ones, not as weak and easily subdued as the ones I’ve previously faced. They say it’s been terrorizing the pixies that care for the glen for months, slowly leaching away the magic that causes the flowers to grow so abundantly.

When we near the forest, there is a noticeable transition from what appears healthy to that which is sickly. Many of the trees and grass are gray, and even the sunlight seems to be lessened here. The birds and squirrels are fewer, and the noises that would normally populate a dense forest such as this are absent.

But that's not the most unusual thing about the place. Not only is the land sick, but its sickness radiates, causing those around it to be weakened as well. I immediately feel the effects, now sluggish and not as clearheaded.

A great cloud hangs over the wood, and it's not just the blight. However, when I see the blight, I'm stricken with fear. It's immense, bigger than a house, and a steady stream of magic flows from the forest to the creature. The mist and tendrils of black fog that curl from it pulsate wildly.

"I don't know if I can do this," I say to Dimitri under my breath.

"Nonsense," he replies. "You've got a whole team to help you this time."

Sycamore gives a signal to the archers, who raise their crossbows. They fire one round at the blight, and it roars, launching a fierce mental assault against the whole group. A few of the men stumble to their knees, and I'm no different.

The creature's mind is alien and much stronger than the previous blights I've dealt with. This one even seems to have a face, ugly and shifting, like the rest of it. It turns its face toward us and levels a stare at us with dead eyes.

Sycamore motions to the fiddle players, and they start up a high, reedy tune. The blight roars again. It can't seem to decide who to focus on more. Its eyes turn from the fiddle players to the archers in a dizzying back and forth.

When one of the archers fires a net that causes the blight to sink toward the ground, I step forward.

Here goes nothing.

I get as close as I can stomach before trying my usual methods of making the blight return the magic it's stolen. Only this time, it doesn't immediately dissipate as it has in the past. A high-pitched choking sound comes from the creature. It appears to be laughing at me.

That doesn't work if the magic belongs to me, comes the invasive thought into my mind, and I realize that this blight can speak in more than just images.

How is this possible? I ask it. It remains silent. I would, too, if I were an evil, magic-sapping creature, one whose secrecy would keep me alive for a bit longer.

“What’s taking so long?” Sycamore grunts. “Dissolve it.”

“It says the magic belongs to it. My abilities are not working to fight it this time.” I’m assuming that being fae-blessed allows me to do good, but it doesn’t automatically mean I can steal power from someone if it belongs to them. I could be wrong, though.

“There is only one explanation, then,” Sycamore whispers to himself. “And it’s what I feared the most.”

CHAPTER NINE

Seelie and Unseelie

SYCAMORE RUNS HIS hands through his coal-colored hair and sighs. “There are fae who are working with the blight. That is the only explanation for the fact that its magic is its own. They are lending power to the creatures to gain more power. That this sickness is happening so close to the royal city suggests that they have ulterior motives, motives that are not friendly to our queen. Our city is being targeted.”

“So, how do we defeat it, then?” I ask, at a loss.

“They say that there are certain flowers in the far north that can help amplify the fae-blessed’s power,” Juniper interjects. “The way is far and dangerous, and there are terrors there that have long lurked in the dark. If you cannot defeat them in this state, perhaps the bitterroot from the Northern Mountains can give you what you need.”

“Great,” I say gloomily. “I love danger. When do we start?”

“That, little human, is up to the queen,” says Sycamore. “We’ll take this blight into captivity for now. It will be useful for training the new recruits.”

And so, we head back to the castle, where I am less than delighted to find Rose waiting for me.

“Queen Ash has requested I show you around the city,” she says airily. “You’re going to tell her I was perfectly lovely and that you had a great time, and I’m going to show you what will happen to you if you cross me.”

I grit my teeth and say nothing, but I follow her into the city anyway. We take the winding, uneven roads past the nicer buildings until we start to see the signs of the more impoverished districts. When she finally stops, it’s before a wooden shop with a red roof that looks to be falling apart.

“In here is one of our sweatshops,” Rose says cheerily. “Faeries who have committed crimes unworthy of

imprisonment are placed here to work out their sentence.” Her voice takes on a hard edge. “Cross me, and I’ll make sure no one remembers your name. I’ll stick you in a sweatshop for years until your hands are calloused, and you forget what a pretty life you’ve had.

“I’ve worked hard for the position I’ve gotten. You were born into it. But as quickly as something is given, it can be taken away. Remember that.”

I don’t mention that she’s left her words open to interpretation, and she would do well to remember her position can be taken away, too. Instead, I say nothing. I don’t yet know the full sway this faerie has in the queen’s court, and I’m not going to do anything to cross that line until I do. I wonder if Queen Ash knows about this side of Rose’s personality or if she only sees the sucking up and the sugary-sweet side.

The tour consists of nothing more than the sweatshop and the docks, where Rose threatens to have me drowned if I so much as breathe a word of the events of my afternoon with her to anyone. When she’s done threatening me, she takes me back to my room in the castle, where she leaves me with Petal. I glare at her back as she walks away, then I shut the door and turn to the maidservant.

“She’s just lovely, isn’t she?” Petal says, sarcasm and venom dripping from her words as thickly as honey.

“She couldn’t be lovelier,” I respond in kind, my teeth gritted.

“I take it she did her whole sweatshop and drowning bit?” Petal asks.

“She did. So, she’s done this before?”

“To all the new girls the queen dotes on. Rose will forget about you eventually. At least, I hope she will.” Petal moves to the wardrobe and opens it. “Your dress is filthy. Did she take you through every mud puddle as well? Come. I’ll help you get changed.”

Once dressed, I make my way to find the queen. I don’t know if I need to request an audience or not, but I’m sure she

will tell me when I see her. After exploring a while, I find her alone in a small library or study.

“Ah, Shaylynn,” she says, using my alias. “I was wondering when you’d come to find me. If you ever wonder where I am, this is the most likely place. There are so many treasures of wisdom and knowledge to help me lead in here. But that’s not why you’ve come. You may sit. I’m sure you have much to discuss.”

“Well, Your Majesty,” I begin, “I am not sure if your captain of the guard told you, but there was some trouble in the Eastern Forest today. I was unable to kill the blight there. Juniper suggested that I get some bitterroot from the Northern Mountains to amplify my abilities.”

“Yes, I believe Sycamore did mention that,” Queen Ash affirms. “It is a sound plan, but it is quite dangerous. There are old magics and ancient creatures in the Northern Mountains. There are even rumors of dragons there. We haven’t seen any dragons in almost one hundred years, so I am not sure if the rumors are true. But you’ll need more than just your fae-blessed abilities to make it there.”

“What do you suggest?”

“There is a bow that never misses its mark hidden deep in a cave due west of here. That might prove useful against the foes you may face in the Northern Mountains. The cave is guarded by a troll, one that will not part with his treasure lightly.

“You may only take three others with you. Any more and the troll will most definitely become territorial. But in a party of no more than four, perhaps you can win him over with wit in lieu of a fight. You should leave at dawn. Good luck to you, princess.”

Dismissed, I go to find Dimitri. Then I’ll find Sycamore. He seems like a wise choice to bring, and he’ll know which others to bring as well.

* * *

Sycamore enlists Spruce to join us on our quest to retrieve the bow from the troll's cave. I didn't know Spruce made his residence in Careny, but it is nice to see him again. He gives me a small smile when he sees me. Sycamore tells me Spruce is the head huntsman for the queen, eliminating any insurgence of Unseelie creatures that pop up over the land.

We plan to ride horses to the western forest and leave them tied at the border. They would surely bolt if we took them too close to the cave. It's been a long time since I got to enjoy horseback riding, so I am glad we are taking the scenic route to avoid attention. I pat my mare's neck and whisper to her as we ride. Her chestnut coat gleams in the sunlight.

Dimitri was never as comfortable on horseback, but he tolerates it. He has to as a member of my father's army. They ride often during their campaigns.

I look at my love, who gazes adoringly back at me. If only Father were more open to interclass marriages. But he is too concerned with the kingdom to care about his daughter's wishes.

Dimitri is equipped with his longsword and buckler, while I chose dual daggers and a shortbow this time. Sycamore and Spruce both wield Elven longbows.

Elves haven't been seen for centuries, but they left behind many weapons and structures that our technologies can't hope to match. During the First Great War, the elves disappeared, but to where, no one knows. The entire race is gone without a trace.

Before the First Great War, the fae were divided into the Seelie Court and the Unseelie Court. When the High King of the Unseelie Court decided his throne was not enough, he used his most unnatural beasts to wage war against the High Queen of the Seelie Court. He wanted control of all of Faerie in order that he might control the worlds.

The High Queen, knowing that her Seelie fae were no match for the Unseelie creatures of darkness, sought aid from the humans and the elves. The humans, weak in body and mind, were too afraid to lend aid to the High Queen until it

was nearly too late. The elves, alien and mysterious, withdrew from our world rather than take part in the war.

When the humans realized their Seelie allies would soon fall to an even greater foe, they took up arms at last. But the casualties were great. The few remaining Unseelie fae fled, and only one third of the Seelie Court survived.

Some creatures from the Unseelie Court still roam Faerie, while others stalk the night in the human realm, hoping to escape notice and biding their time until they can rise again. At least, that is what the histories say. When telling the tale, some mothers even add that those creatures eat up little children who disobey their parents. There are a lot of stories that mothers end that way.

I'm not too sure how much stock one can put into such tales, but when nearing the lair of one of these Unseelie creatures, my grip tightens on the dagger at my side. Dimitri and Spruce fan out next to me, and Sycamore takes the lead. Our feet crunch on the fallen leaves in the wood.

We pass a deep green lake, where a water nymph peeks up her head to solemnly watch us pass. Her straight, silvery hair falls to her hips, and she has a water lily tucked behind her ear. Her eyes are reflective as they gaze back at us.

Other than her and the plants, there is no sign of any life in this wood. Perhaps the Seelie fae are wise enough to stay far away from the Unseelie. If we were smart, we would, too.

The mouth of the cave is just up ahead, and from it comes the most horrendous stench of rot and decay. The vile smell burns my nostrils and pulls on my gag reflex. Gnawed bones lie scattered near the cave mouth and trail into it as well. Loud snoring comes from inside. We keep moving, and I have to hold back a scream when my foot bumps into a humanoid skull.

We've come, hoping we might barter riddles for the bow. Trolls are notorious for their love of riddles. It's the only thing they're good at besides killing and eating. They may be dumb, but they can solve a riddle as easily as they can snap a spine.

We'll need to give this troll an unsolvable riddle if we are to win the bow and escape with our lives.

"Oi! Troll!" calls Sycamore.

The snoring stops, but the sound that replaces it is worse. It is the sound of large, squelching footsteps and bones snapping beneath them.

And then it comes into view. Its horrible, squat-nosed face peeks out, and its beady eyes narrow at us. We can't see its whole body, but what we do see is disgusting. The troll has gray skin of a bulbous, pustular nature, and it's fat from gorging on the meat of unsuspecting fae. It wears only a dirty loincloth for clothes, from which dangles a large club.

"Who dares enter my domain?" comes its gravelly voice.

"Those who offer a riddle," Spruce calls out.

The troll's eyebrows raise in interest. "A riddle? I haven't had a good riddle in an age."

"We'll offer you two if you will part with your Elven bow," Sycamore says.

"My bow? What would ye want with my bow?" Suspicion darkens the troll's visage.

"Our reasons are our own. We'll give you two riddles, and if you can't solve them both, the bow is ours. Do we have a deal?" Spruce asks.

The troll seems to think for a moment. "And wot's in it for me if ye should lose?"

"Then you can eat us," says Sycamore.

The stakes are high, but we don't plan to lie down and be eaten if we lose. I just hope the stories aren't true about trolls and riddles. I hope ours are as unsolvable as Sycamore seems to think. A fight with this beast could prove extremely difficult.

"It's a deal," the troll says. "I haven't had Seelie fae in a few days. You'll make a nice dinner."

CHAPTER TEN

Riddles in the Dark

HYACINTH HAD AN issue today with the human princess's mother. That awful woman seems to impose her will on her daughter at any chance she gets, and she treats the servants like they are beneath her in every way. She doesn't know how Shayna puts up with the constant demands and high expectations.

It was so hard to watch her treat the servants as if they had no rights today. She barely held her tongue enough to mutter that she was going to train with "Dimitri" before walking out. And when she finally got to the training ground, she ended up taking out her frustrations on Birch, the changeling impersonating the princess's lover.

She noticed some eyebrows raised among the humans training nearby as she battered Birch's defenses again and again. She'll have to be more careful. And somehow, she'll have to delicately drive this old, human king away before they give the princess to him in marriage. She is sure that if Shayna were to return to find herself wed, there would be hell to pay.

* * *

"Alright. First riddle," Spruce says. The troll sits on a large boulder and leans in. Its putrid breath nearly causes me to gag. "He lived for days and months and years, almost away from air. And never a leg nor arm had he, and never a lock of hair. But neither crippled nor lame was he, nor had he a coat to wear."

"Two guesses," Sycamore says. "We'll make this more interesting."

"Delightful," the troll squeals. "A frog?"

"No."

"Then it must be a fish," the troll says matter-of-factly.

“Right you are. Next riddle.” Spruce glances at Sycamore as he speaks.

Sycamore steps forward. “They have no fists yet come to blows. In winter, you feel them on your nose. They ride the sky but have no wings. Nor need mouths when they whistle and sing.”

This one seems to stump the troll for a moment. That was what we’d hoped. The fae scholars carefully crafted this riddle for us, knowing that there was more chance of winning with one that had never been heard before.

But the troll doesn’t hesitate for long before he answers, “The winds.”

From the stricken look on Sycamore’s face, the troll gathers he is right. And then his booming laugh shakes the trees. “I’ll eat heartily for days,” he says wickedly.

With one nod at Spruce, Sycamore charges the Unseelie creature. He jumps in the air and pulls out a hidden dagger, which he proceeds to swipe at the troll’s face. The troll is slow, but he is strong. If he manages to get one hit in, any of us will be incapacitated. Therefore, we deem it wise to keep our distance and use range attacks while Sycamore distracts him.

I nock an arrow and let it go. My skill with weapons is unprecedented, so I’m not surprised when the arrow hits him square in the eye. He bellows in pain, and Sycamore uses that distraction to stab his other eye. Blinded, the troll backs slowly toward the mouth of his cave.

“Oathbreakers! I’ll remember you,” the troll shouts, clutching his bleeding face. “Mark my words, you’ll pay for this.”

Spruce slips past him and enters his cave. There is some rustling and bones snapping, but he returns with a gilded yew bow and a quiver of golden arrows. Golden leaves stretch all along the weapon. He hands the bow and quiver to me and does a deep bow.

“We must go. Wield this weapon well, princess. The quiver will continually replenish, and the bow will never miss,

so long as you are near enough to your target.”

As thunder cracks in the sky, we rush away from the troll. But when we come to the lake with the water nymph, this time, she’s sitting on the bank. She motions me closer. One hand on my weapon, I approach.

“I know what you’ve done,” says the nymph, her eerie, reflective eyes staring straight into my soul. Her voice is like a babbling brook. “Crossing the Unseelie is a dangerous move. They have long memories and longer lifespans, and they lie in wait to exact vengeance. I hope that bow is worth it.”

Then she disappears beneath the water in one smooth dive, her silvery hair fanning behind her.

Dimitri lets out a sigh and says, “I really don’t like this place. The perils here are much too foreign for me. At least in the king’s army, I knew the humans had no magic, and their attacks were much easier to assess and predict. What good am I to be in protecting you if I know nothing of these enemies?”

“I find it hard to believe that any enemy will be immune to a sword or arrow. We may not know their attacks, but we will just have to be more intent in ours.” I grab his hand. “Come. Let’s return to the others.”

We make our way back to our horses, which are throwing their heads and stamping the ground in impatience. We have been gone for a while. Quickly mounting them, we start our march back to Careny.

This time, we were successful, but the water nymph’s warning echoes in the back of my mind. I find it hard to shake, and thoughts of what is to come swim in my head for the duration of our ride.

Upon our return, a messenger greets us and tells us the queen is expecting us in her study. So, that is where Dimitri and I head once we stable the horses.

It’s a shame we haven’t been able to ride for pleasure in a while, although I’m sure Dimitri would disagree. I chuckle softly at the memory of him almost falling off one of our stallions in Feristle during a ride together. Dim gives me a

questioning look at my laugh, and I wave him off. Now isn't the time to discuss memories of the past. The present is too demanding.

When we enter the library, we find the queen with what I can only assume is a spriggan. Its tiny body is made of tree bark, but its eyes are cold as steel as it looks at us with calculating intensity. It holds an even smaller wooden staff in its hand.

"Is this her?" it says in a scraping voice.

"Archie, meet Shaylynn. I think she would be perfect to help you with your problem," Queen Ash says grandly.

"She doesn't look like much," says the spriggan. Then he turns to me. "Do you have any experience with leprechauns?"

Before I can answer, the queen interjects, "She has enough charm to convince a dryad to live in a city. Why don't you tell her what's going on?"

"Very well, Your Majesty." The spriggan eyes me with suspicion, but I meet his gaze. Something in mine seems to soothe his worries, and he nods. "A leprechaun has been terrorizing my wood, stealing from every burrow and disappearing into the night. I was told you may be able to help. In exchange, I will provide you with magical healing herbs and deadly poisons for your journey to the Northern Mountains. Do you think you can sway the leprechaun to leave?"

"I will do my best," I respond.

"If you can manage it, my people will be in your debt." The spriggan hops down from the chair it sat on and walks toward the door. He barely comes up to my knee, so it takes him a long time.

Once he leaves, the queen turns to me. "Now," she says. "Let us speak."

Queen Ash motions for us to sit. "I am sorry to spring this on you, but with where you're going, you will need as many advantages as possible," she says. "I invited the spriggan here because their kind is known for their many herbs and

poultices. They can be most beneficial during your journey. There are many creatures, old and malignant, in the Northern Mountains, and the right herbs could be lifesaving when you need healing or antidotes.”

“What do you know of leprechauns?” I ask, mentally preparing myself.

“They love shiny things, green things, and valuables. You can use those to lure it. Emeralds may be your wisest choice. Leprechauns can teleport, so you’ll need something that can trap it and prevent it from doing so. Four-leaf clovers weaken them. A trap with emeralds and four-leaf clovers would be ideal.”

Queen Ash moves to the bookshelf and pulls on a plain, leather-bound book. The bookshelf opens to reveal a small treasure room. Walking inside, she gathers a pile of emeralds into a satchel.

“This should be enough,” she says. “The clover you’ll need to find for yourself. There may be some in the Southern Plain.”

I almost tell her “thank you,” but I catch myself. Instead, I bow my head in appreciation and take the gems from her. “I guess there’s no time to waste,” I say, and I turn to leave with Dimitri.

We don’t know our way to the Southern Plain, so I enlist Spruce as our guide. He is more than happy to help us in the name of the queen. We tack up our horses and head down the south road at a decent pace.

I ride the same mare as last time, and I learn her name is Buttercup. The horses here are not like in the human realm. They’re smarter, sturdier, and far more loyal. Spruce tells me that they won’t stray far from their rider and generally don’t even need a lead rope to follow you.

When we reach the Southern Plain, I am struck by how beautiful it is. Miles of flowery grassland stretch before us, barely a tree in sight, but the few trees that do grow here are *tall*. One, in particular, stands much taller than the rest.

“That’s the Tree of Beginnings and Endings,” Spruce says when he catches me staring. “They say that it’s been here since the dawn of time, and any who eat its fruit learn something of their past and future. In fact, I’m to take you to it while we’re here. The queen wants you to have every advantage.”

I’m in awe of this marvelous tree. It must be several hundred feet tall, but its branches stretch low toward the ground, making its fruit easy to reach. It’s almost as if it wants us to pluck it.

Dimitri and I walk up to its trunk. It seems to whisper to us as we approach, and its grand branches sway majestically in the breeze.

The tree’s fruit looks like oversized cherries, and when I pick one, it feels squishy and fuzzy in my hand. Taking a bite, I marvel at how sweet and juicy it is. Then a vivid series of images assails my senses as it comes over me.

I see myself on the night my sister was taken from us. I watch my sleeping form from the doorway to my chamber in Feristle. Down the hall, a dark-haired faerie enters my sister’s chamber. She screams, and my parents and I wake and rush to her room. Tinkling but cold laughter comes from everywhere and nowhere. Then a bell sounds, soft and subtle, and like magic, everyone else in the castle wakes, too.

The vision changes. *I see myself facing the same dark-haired faerie, who stands next to an angry blight, pointing at me. The blight charges.*

I shake my head, coming out of the detailed visions to find myself lying on the ground. The tree’s leaves tickle my cheek in a caress before the branch pulls away.

“What was that?” I ask, dazed.

“The tree likes you. It rarely moves for anyone,” Spruce responds. Then he adds, “Tell no one but Dimitri what you saw. Now, let’s begin our search.”

I’m deep in thought as I ponder what the visions of the past and future could mean. I assume the dark-haired faerie I saw was Barlow. Does this mean I’ll face off against him?

We comb over the plain with intense focus. It takes us several hours, but we finally find three individual four-leaf clovers. It will have to be enough.

You would think that the fae would have a way to search for these things more efficiently, but sadly, their magic doesn't work that way. We spent valuable time trying to find these.

But I suppose this means we're ready to capture a leprechaun.

* * *

We lay the trap in the Eastern Forest at dusk. The wood feels eerie at this time of night. It's that moment right before the things that lurk come out to hunt, and the innocent hide away from the prowling creatures of darkness.

The forest is too still. None of the bustling sounds of daylight fill the air, but in their stead is a watchful silence. I'm wary of every snap of a twig or the rustling of leaves. It leaves me on edge. At least we came well armed.

After setting the emeralds on display with the four-leaf clovers hidden under them, we retreat and wait for the leprechaun to spring our trap. With the four-leaf clovers so near, he shouldn't be able to teleport out of the net we've set for him.

It's a waiting game now. Dimitri, Spruce, another one of the queen's enforcers, and I stay hidden nearby, waiting for the sound of our quarry's capture. It doesn't take long.

When we hear the net being triggered, we draw our weapons and approach, and there, in our clever trap, is the leprechaun. He struggles angrily against the net before leveling his glare on us.

"Let me down from here!" he shouts. "I'll fight the lot of you."

"In a moment, dear sir," I say, feigning an imploring attitude. "We're terribly sorry to have trapped you, but you see, this was the only way we could get close enough to admire you."

The leprechaun stills, suspicion crossing his gaze.
“Admire me, you say?”

“Yes. We have heard of your skill at thievery, but they did not tell of your dashing good looks. Would you spare us a moment of your time?”

“Not that I have a choice, but I suppose I can do that,” he replies, preening at my flattery.

“Wonderful!” I exclaim cheerily. “We offer you these emeralds as a token of our goodwill. We also offer them as payment on behalf of the good spriggans of this wood, who are poor in both wealth and spirit. They cannot bear to be around a leprechaun so fine as yourself, and although they appreciate your frequent visits, they request that they cease. Your splendor is too much for them, so we and they offer you this parting gift, beseeching you to accept. Will you take these emeralds as a peace offering and go elsewhere?”

“I’m not sure how to argue with that. My, what beautiful emeralds indeed. I accept. Consider me gone. Now, let me down.” The leprechaun fidgets in the net.

“Gladly, good sir. Gladly.” I turn to Spruce. “Lower the net.”

As soon as the leprechaun’s feet touch the ground, he picks up the emeralds and teleports to who knows where.

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

“You’re amazing,” Dimitri agrees, kissing me.

“We should get back and let the queen know of our success. I’m sure the spriggans will be pleased.”

We walk back to our horses, which we’d left tied up a mile away. It’s time to see the queen. I hope I’m more prepared now for the journey to the Northern Mountains. We still need bitterroot to help with my powers, but I’m no longer as afraid of the unknown.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Transformation

HYACINTH THINKS SHE'S finally driven the king of Sylvidra away, but she may have done too good a job. The castle bustles about as the princess's father tries to make amends with the old king before he starts a war. Maybe she shouldn't have insulted him so.

At any rate, there will be no marriage. The queen is quite cross with her. Shayna's father only seems resigned as he follows King William around, apologizing profusely for his daughter's actions.

"I trust we can move past this, old friend?" King Frederick asks the gray-headed king. Hyacinth doesn't hear his answer.

When the old royal finally leaves, he and his men galloping away upon valiant horses, King Frederick addresses the changeling. "Do you seek to be unmarried all your life? Will you force your brother to care for you when I am old and gone?"

"No, Father," Hyacinth responds, playing the role of abashed daughter.

"Then what is it? Why do you shoo away every decent suitor?" The king runs his hand over his face.

Hyacinth doesn't know what to answer at first, but then she gets a brilliant idea. "I want to marry for love, Father."

"Princesses don't get to choose," he says simply, turning on his heel and walking out.

* * *

"You never fail to surprise me," says Queen Ash when we enter the throne room. She is taking complaints from the people of Careny today. I watch a dwarf who is extremely short, even for his kind, shrink back as the queen rises and descends from the dais to address us. "Archie sent word of your success, along with several healing herbs and antidotes to

various poisons. You may either wait here and observe until we can discuss it, or you may explore some more of the city.”

I shudder at the idea of the queen ordering Rose to chaperone me again, so I choose to wait. It is interesting to listen to Fae court politics. They’re much different from the court politics in Feristle, not that I sat in often when Father took complaints. I was there for them a time or two, though.

In Feristle, the people’s complaints consisted of farmers whose crops were stolen, vineyard owners whose laborers did nothing, laborers who claimed not to receive fair wages, and the like.

Here at Careny, in the heart of the Fae realm, the concerns are a lot more unique. When the dwarf finishes speaking on how his mines are plagued by an Unseelie beast, a sprite with long, fiery hair steps forward. I didn’t know sprites came in forms the size of a faerie, having only seen the tiny ones in the wood, but she can’t be much shorter than I am.

“Your Majesty,” the sprite says, curtsying and bowing her head almost to the ground.

The queen inclines her head in return and says, voice imperious, “You may speak.”

“We’ve had reports of our people going missing, empty beds in the dead of night. Someone must be sent to investigate. First, it was our men, then it was our women. Now our children are also disappearing. Please, Your Majesty.”

“Sycamore, have your scouts heard reports of such things?” Queen Ash asks, turning her steely gaze on him.

“Nothing, my queen.” Sycamore’s face is a mask of cool indifference in the court. This must be the norm for courtly business.

“Can we spare anyone to investigate?”

“All our troops are spent fighting the blight in the Eastern Forest, my queen.” Sycamore doesn’t break her gaze.

The queen lets out a weary sigh. “I think we can spare one soldier to see what we can discover. Send someone at dawn.”

“Thank you, thank you, Your Majesty. Many thanks and blessings,” the sprite says, tears of gratitude streaming. She falls at the queen’s feet before rising and saying, “My people will never forget this.”

Queen Ash inclines her head once more and calls upon the next faerie, effectively dismissing the tearful sprite. I listen to a few more complaints before tuning the room out, then I focus on Dimitri.

We have gotten very few moments alone since coming to Careny, something I fear will increase once we leave on our journey to the Northern Mountains. Soon I need to speak with him privately. I know what I want from the lake near Gardenia’s hut. After much thought, I’ve figured out a way to both save my sister and to change Father’s mind, but it won’t be easy. In fact, it could be the most dangerous thing I’ve done yet.

Father cares about the success of his kingdom. Perhaps if he were not king, who his daughter marries would not be as much of an issue. But everyone in the kingdom relies on him to protect them and provide them security. A strategic marriage would ensure that for his people. But what if I could make Dimitri my equal?

Not only could Dimitri help in this fight against Barlow and the blight, something he’s terribly outmatched in as a human, but he could be like me. If Dimitri was also fae-blessed, then we could save my sister together. And perhaps as a reward for defeating the blight, Queen Ash might grant him a province and the title of prince over it. Father might let me marry a prince, even a prince of Faerie.

It’s a risk because it gambles on the Queen’s hospitality and puts Dimitri in danger. I couldn’t bear to lose him. But if it were to work, then I could have my happily ever after. I just have to make Father see.

Queen Ash’s declaration interrupts my thoughts. “We’re done for today,” she says, her voice ringing out in the throne room, and everyone but Dimitri, Spruce, and me exits in a hurry.

“Well, Shaylynn,” the Queen begins, using my alias. “I believe you are ready. You have the herbs and poultices, the bow that never misses, and you will have some troops to go with you. You shall leave in two days’ time.”

“Your Majesty,” I start. “If you would not object, I would like to visit the lake that changes one’s fate before my journey.”

Surprise crosses the queen’s face, quickly replaced with pride. “Thought of what you want already? Will you tell me what you’ve decided?”

“I will. But first I must speak to someone about it.” I’m careful not to glance at Dimitri. If he refuses, I may have no need to go to the lake just yet.

“Very well. But be quick. I shall have to postpone your departure for the mountains if you plan to visit the lake first.” Queen Ash moves toward the door. “No matter. The blight will be there for us regardless of when you begin your quest.”

Then both the queen and Spruce leave us, and I turn to Dimitri, outlining my plan. When I finish, a slow smile spreads across his devastatingly handsome face, and he kisses me with fervor.

“You’re diabolical,” he breathes between kisses. “This may just work. Yes, love, I’ll do it. How could I not? You said yourself that I’m defenseless in this land, and it’s true.” Then he kisses me again, and I pull away, breathless.

Sometimes these kisses make me question my resolve. I’ve never been with a man, and I don’t intend to do so before we are properly wed.

Hopefully, that day will be soon. And that’s a hope I can live with.

* * *

It takes us less time to get back to the lake than it did to get to Careny from Gardenia’s. I don’t know if it was magic or what, but we arrive in a mere day and a half. The lake is as clear as ever. It almost looks turquoise in the sunlight.

I take one step in, and immediately, I feel the lake calling to me, singing over me. *Tell us what you wish*, it preens. *Tell us how to honor you*. Its gentle waves lap over me as I go deeper.

“I wish for Dimitri, my combat trainer and my love, to be fae-blessed like me.”

You take nothing for yourself?

“This is technically for me, too,” I whisper to the lake.

We shall grant it, but beware. Our gifts are not like the fae’s.

Before I can ask what that means, I hear Dimitri’s gasp from behind me, and I turn. He’s shimmering. I watch as his feet lift off the ground, and before he descends, his entire body changes. He becomes even more handsome, if that’s possible. His tan deepens, his skin takes on an ethereal beauty, and his eyes, which were a muted sea green, now look richer and deeper than they ever were.

“You’re staring,” he says when it’s done.

“I know. I can’t help it. You look amazing. How do you feel?”

“Powerful. Like I can run for days and not get tired. Like I could lift a mountain with one hand and hold it up forever.” Dimitri examines his skin as he speaks, flexing his muscles as if to test them out.

I turn to our escorts. The queen didn’t send us with Spruce, Sycamore, or anyone we’ve met previously. “What can we expect?” I ask them.

“This has never happened before,” says the yellow-skinned one, his face betraying nothing. “Only time will tell.”

“Alright. Then I guess there’s no time to waste. We need to get back to Careny to let Queen Ash know we’re ready to face the Northern Mountains.” I mount my horse, Buttercup. “You ready, girl?”

She nickers, but I have no idea if that means she understood. Do fae horses understand language?

We make it back to Careny in good time, and when we appear before the queen, she looks as if she was expecting us.

“Welcome back,” she says, smiling warmly at me. “I’ve had two pack horses laden with supplies prepared for you. You will travel in a company of twelve, yourself and Dimitri included. I am sending some of my best soldiers with you, as well as Spruce, my huntsman, and Juniper from my enforcers. Travel speedily, for the mountains are cold and treacherous.”

With that, she dismisses us, and our escorts lead us to the stables. The rest of our party waits for us there, where they are saddling up their mounts. Dressed in traveling clothes, Juniper steps forward to greet us.

“Good to see you again!” he says. We haven’t seen each other since we captured the blight in the Eastern Forest. “The queen has left me in charge of this quest. I deemed it best we leave immediately. The longer this journey takes, the more likely the blights are to keep spreading.”

“I suppose that’s it, then. I have no objections,” I respond.

Juniper claps his hands together and gives the order to move out. Then we mount our horses, all twelve of us. I’m riding my chestnut mare, Buttercup, again, and Dimitri is on a large black gelding named Lightning. Juniper takes the lead, but my love and I are close behind.

“I don’t feel like a burden on this quest anymore,” Dimitri whispers to me as we ride. “Although I’m not sure what this transformation has done to me—nor what I can do now that I’m fae-blessed like you—I can tell I’m changed. I know that if a magical foe arises, I will stand a chance at fighting it off and defending you.”

“We will just have to wait and see what new abilities make themselves known. For now, I’m just glad you’re with me,” I say to him, putting warmth into my words.

We ride for miles without a break, but when we finally stop, it’s just to eat and stretch our legs. We make temporary camp in a glen. It’s not the safest place to be, but we don’t plan to stay long. There aren’t a lot of areas to take shelter

along the north road. It stretches, open and barren, for a hundred miles.

While we eat, the fae we travel with tell stories.

“They say Queen Ash killed more than ten thousand fae in the war,” one of the men says. I think his name is Ginkgo. “When the Unseelie attacked the Seelie Court, she led the frontline assault. When the Seelie Court High Queen was assassinated by one of the Unseelie, Queen Ash redoubled her efforts. They say she tipped the scales in our favor. It’s part of why they elected her to replace the High Queen. We’re under one Court now. All things bow to the Seelie.”

“Is the queen really that old?” I interject. “I thought the First Great War happened over a thousand years ago.”

“Her bonding with Faerie has extended her life insurmountably. The common fae live to be no more than eight hundred. She is almost one thousand two hundred fifty years old.”

I almost choke on my food. “How is that possible?”

“You’ll learn that in Faerie, nothing is impossible,” Ginkgo replies mysteriously.

“So, if not all of the Unseelie were eradicated, where are they now?” Dimitri asks, invested in the history.

“That’s the thing,” Ginkgo whispers. “Nobody knows. There’s a few here and there that pop up and cause us trouble occasionally, but the vast majority are unaccounted for. That’s why our military is so vast. If they ever invade again, we’ll be ready.”

That thought seems to sober the group up. We finish our meal in silence and go to sleep.

The sounds of the glen are peaceful as we sleep, but it doesn’t last. We are awoken by a mighty roar, one loud enough to shake the trees.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ledgewood

THE CAMP ROUSES in a hurry, everyone grabbing their weapons and armor. I don my gilded yew bow and my quiver of limitless arrows. I'll need to name my weapon at some point, but for now, I charge into battle.

We can't find the source of the roar. It sounds like it's coming from the marsh just outside of the glen, but the noise echoes from all around us, making it hard to pinpoint. My eyes scan the area and find nothing.

"Rally!" Juniper shouts. "Defensive formations!"

Then we hear the clacking of teeth and the shuffling. A low growl comes from behind us, and the ugliest creature I've ever seen emerges from the marsh. It has long, muscular arms and a humanoid form, but other than that, it doesn't look human at all. It's short and hairy, and it has large, round yellow eyes, which glare at us in both a menacing and emotionless expression.

"What is that?" I gape at it.

"That, dear princess, is a boulie," Ginkgo says. "And we don't want it anywhere near us."

"Stay back, foul demon!" Juniper orders, leveling his sword at it.

I nock an arrow and aim, while Dimitri stands near me with a protective stance.

The boulie lets out a howl that sends shivers down my spine. But it doesn't stop shuffling closer, its horrible maw open to reveal pointy teeth.

"I'm warning you! Stay back!" Juniper swings his sword threateningly.

The boulie charges, and suddenly, everything happens all at once.

I freeze in fear, and Ginkgo steps between me and the monster. But doing so only allows for the creature to swipe its nasty claws at him, ripping open a terrible gash in his forearm. Dimitri raises glowing hands and aims at the threat. At the same moment, Juniper lops off the boulie's head, which rolls along the ground to stop at my shoe.

I yank my foot away in distaste, doing my best not to look at the monster's unseeing eyes and creepy, smiling face.

Juniper examines Ginkgo's arm, which steadily bleeds from the three long gashes. As he wraps it, he says, "The wound is bad, and even if it weren't so deep, the boulie's claws are poisonous. You'll need a healer. Perhaps we have an antidote to help among those that Archie the spriggan gave us, but it won't do more than delay the poison. Only a healer can draw the toxins out."

"Where will we find a healer?" I inquire.

"They mainly dwell in cities. The nearest city is two days' journey from here, but it's out of the way. We'll need to be careful not to have too many delays, as our supplies were meant to last only so long. But going to a city brings its own problems."

"What do you mean?" Dimitri asks. His hands have stopped glowing now. I'll have to ask him about that later.

"Northern cities are not as subservient to our queen. The Unseelie Court is rumored to have fled north during the war. They say allies to the traitors make their habitation in the northern reaches of the kingdom. There is only so far the queen's influence can reach. While in the city, we mustn't reveal our purpose, nor should we reveal who it is we serve.

"In the meantime, I'll apply an antidote to Ginkgo's wound. Everyone else, pack your belongings. We need to vacate the camp before something worse shows up. The smell of blood could draw all manner of evil things."

We pack up our tents and load up the horses before we start moving at a quickened pace. The sun is just beginning to

rise, and the crimson sky matches the spilled blood of the recent battle.

I can't get the image out of my head of the boulie's grotesque head rolling toward my foot. We ride in silence, which doesn't help my dark thoughts, either, and I look around as we go.

If it's possible, Ginkgo's skin looks a deeper shade of green than normal. He holds his reins in one hand and clutches his arm as if it pains him. Sweat beads across his brow, dripping steadily down his face and disappearing under the collar of his brown tunic. He doesn't look like he'll make it much longer without that healer. Juniper was right; the spriggan's poultices gave us time but not much.

Dimitri is the first to break the silence. "Shayna," he whispers, using my given name. Since we're not in the queen's city among spies, and since we trust everyone on our expedition, we've abandoned the alias for now.

I look to my love expectantly.

"I have a bad feeling about this city. We should find another one," he says. His shoulders are tense, and his grip on his horse's reins is firm. If he grips them any harder, his knuckles will turn white.

"Not that I don't trust you on this, but have you seen Ginkgo? He won't last a journey to another city. He looks like he'll barely make the two days to this one." I look again at the sickly fae, who slumps in his saddle as if it's hard to hold himself up.

Dimitri closes his mouth but seems as if he wishes to say more. Finally, he continues. "I don't like this. I don't like it at all."

I try to ignore my anxiousness about his warning. There is no other choice if Ginkgo is to make it through this journey.

We continue riding until evening, then Juniper calls for us to make camp. "Set up tents. We'll leave in the early morning, and we should arrive at the city of Ledgewood by nightfall tomorrow."

Ginkgo doesn't look very good. He seems weak, and he drifts off while sitting on a log. I pull out the *porchis* Gardenia gave me and break off a small piece. I don't want to use all of it because it is supposed to help me restore my energy when I use too much of my powers. However, Ginkgo needs it more than I do right now.

"Here," I say, shoving it into his hands. His eyes snap open. "Take this. Eat."

He nibbles on it at first, but when he feels its effects, he eats it wholeheartedly. It works. He seems to have his strength back, but he is still incredibly sickly. At least he's not in danger of dying overnight.

Once Ginkgo is back to resting, I settle down in Dimitri's arms. He feels warm and safe on this cool night. I feel hesitant to fall asleep after last night's boulie attack, but exhaustion soon overtakes me, and my hypervigilant body betrays me. Before I realize what's happened, I'm dreaming.

My dreams are full of shifting monsters. The boulie attacks me, then it changes into the troll. The troll becomes my father, scowling down disapprovingly at me as he orders Dimitri's hanging. Then it's Dimitri scowling at me as he tells me it's foolish to go to the city of Ledgewood.

As a result, when Juniper wakes the lot of us, I don't feel rested at all. But that won't stop me from continuing. I've had plenty of restless nights before.

Ginkgo made it through the night without dying, but he looks worse than he did yesterday. I hope we can make it to the city in time. And I hope Dimitri is wrong about there being trouble.

And so, we depart, each one of us in varying degrees of trepidation.

* * *

Because of our quickened pace, we make it to Ledgewood before sunset. The city is made up of a small group of houses and huts grown from trees, and it sits on a cliffside at the edge of a wood. The settlement hangs over the side of the cliff on a

ledge made from the canopy of a gigantic tree. The enormous tree spans the base of the cliff to its crest, and all the homes are grown from the giant tree and the trees of the surrounding wood. This must be why they named the city Ledgewood.

One large building sits wider and higher than the rest, and I wonder what's inside of it.

A wall creates a border on the edge of the town that meets the forest. Its borders are open on the edges that stop at the cliff. It makes me wonder if they would be invaded on those sides in the event of an attack.

We tie up our horses somewhere out of sight and approach on foot. When we reach the gate, a guard lowers his spear at us. "What's your business here?" he asks.

"We seek a healer. One of our party was injured by a boulie and is in need of care," Juniper responds.

"A boulie, you say?" The guard scratches his chin. "What were you doing so far from the towns that a boulie snuck up on you?"

"Our business is our own." Juniper's eyes are steel as he speaks the words.

"Touchy, touchy. Is that how you treat the one who holds the power to grant or deny entry to the lovely city of Ledgewood?" The guard loves to hear himself talk, it would seem.

"Will you let us through or not?" Juniper is losing patience with the loquacious man.

"Since your friend there doesn't look too good, I'll let you pass. But your business had better end with the healer. You'll find her hut on the south side of the city. It's the one with the red thatched roof and the mushroom garden." The guard moves out of the way, and we enter.

Once inside, we walk through the city streets, which are made of the same wood as the homes. As we near the main square, we notice many of the inhabitants staring at us. I guess a large group of strangers would seem unusual in a city far removed from civilization.

A beggar approaches and says in a wheezy voice, “Spare a coin for an old beggar?”

Juniper digs in his pocket. The only coins we have are those with the queen’s face and inscription, but he places a gold piece in the old fae’s hand and nods at him.

“Wow! I haven’t seen one of these in an age,” he exclaims, biting the coin as if to see if it’s genuine.

We continue on through the streets until we near the southern section of Ledgewood. I glance behind us and notice the beggar trailing along a few hundred yards away.

“The beggar is following us,” I whisper.

“He’s probably not used to being given gold pieces. With a city this poor, I doubt anyone here even has any.” Juniper doesn’t look back as he leads the lot of us.

I try to shake the eerie feeling creeping over me as we turn the corner. But there, just around the next house, is a mushroom garden and a hut with a red thatched roof. Smoke ascends from the chimney in white plumes.

“Shall we?” Juniper says. He knocks on the door.

Within seconds, a young faerie answers, a ladle in her hand. She blows her cobalt hair out of her face and says in an annoyed voice, “Yes?”

“Are you the healer?” Juniper asks.

“I am. What of it?”

“Our friend was scratched by a boulie. Can you help him?” Juniper points at Ginkgo, who clutches his arm and looks as if he might vomit.

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” the healer scolds. “Come in. Quickly now, or you’ll let out all my heat.”

We enter the hut, which is probably large enough for a small family, but with our entire group here, it is quite cramped. It has a bed in the corner, a table and two chairs, and a fireplace, where a pot of stew boils. The faerie puts the ladle in the pot and turns to face us.

“Lay him on the bed,” she orders, and we do as she commands. “Now, let me get my anointing oil.”

She grabs a brown vial off of a shelf near the dining area and removes the cork. Taking two fingers, she dips them in the oil and touches Ginkgo’s wound. Under her breath, she mutters, “In the name of our God. May your wound be healed.”

Miraculously, the wound begins to close.

“How did she do that?” I ask.

“The fae are monotheistic,” the healer responds when she’s done. “We healers use oil, and that, combined with prayers, allows for healing. Our God is loving, but he requires a chaste life in devotion to him to experience all he has to offer. He is the one who gave us all life, and he decides when we die. Now it’s up to him whether your friend will fully heal.”

I have never heard of the fae God before. We didn’t have any religion in Feristle. Humans typically live and die by the sword. It seems an interesting path to walk, and I admire her convictions.

“You are welcome to stay here for the night, but I do not have beds for you. You may do better at the inn,” the healer continues. “If you go to the inn, tell them Aster sent you.”

“You have done much for us, milady,” Juniper says, bowing in respect. “Appreciations. We shan’t impose upon you any further. We’ll leave now for the inn.”

The whole visit took little more than twenty minutes, but the sun is already setting when we step outside. The last rays sink over the horizon like my heart sinks in my chest. I can’t shake the eerie feeling.

We have taken no more than five steps when the ambush begins. Guards and soldiers surround us on all sides, and we’re quickly backed into a corner. A little ways off, I see the beggar from earlier standing with a well-dressed faerie and pointing at us.

This does not bode well, I think as they lead us away. I look around for Dimitri but see neither him nor Juniper among the captured.

Then I feel a sharp pain in the back of my head before everything fades to black.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Mayor

DIMITRI AND JUNIPER sneak past the soldiers and guards unseen. They follow and watch as the soldiers carry their unconscious companions to the largest building, which stands in the center of the city. When they enter a hidden doorway on the side of the wooden structure, Dimitri lets out a breath. “Now what?” he whispers.

Juniper narrows his eyes as he peers at the building, which somewhat resembles a tower. It’s enormous compared to the rest of the structures in the city, standing probably fifty feet tall. “Now we infiltrate and extract.”

“Sounds good to me. Let’s go.” Dimitri starts toward the tower, only to stop when Juniper’s hand lands on his chest.

“Not so fast,” the enforcer says. “We need a plan.”

* * *

I wake to find myself in chains in a cell. It’s curved on the side facing the exterior but straight on the side facing the interior. There’s a solitary window in the wall that shows only the moon in the sky. We must be extremely high up. A barred iron door closes the cell off from the rest of the tower.

Peering around, I see that almost everyone in our party is here and in chains, like me. Most of them are still unconscious. Ginkgo’s arm looks fully healed, and I try to make eye contact with him from across the room.

“Psst,” I whisper.

He looks at me, and his eyes widen. “I thought you were dead, princess.”

Shaking my head no, I ask, “Where do you think we are?”

“We have to be in the tower they have in the center of the city,” he responds. “There’s no way out of these chains. I’ve tried. We’ll need a key or a blunt object. How we’d even use something like that with our arms restrained, I’ve no idea.”

“Any sign of Dimitri or Juniper?”

The faerie shakes his head. “None.”

“Good. We may yet stand a chance. Dimitri is an excellent swordsman. Let’s just hope that if they come for us, they don’t get caught as well.” I peer around. “Any clue where our weapons are?”

Ginkgo points his head toward the door to our cell. “They’re all in that chest out there. I heard the guards fighting over them, but they said they’d let the mayor decide what to do with the ‘spoils.’”

“I see.”

“The mayor sounds like a power-hungry scoundrel,” Ginkgo continues. “The way the guards were talking about him ... We don’t want him to show up here.”

“Hey! Quiet in there! We need to concentrate,” one of said guards calls from the other room. They’re currently playing a game of dice, and it looks like the stakes are high. If the dice game concerns them more than their prisoners talking, they must think there’s no chance we can escape.

Ginkgo and I fall silent. Now it’s just a game of waiting. Waiting to see what they’re going to do with us. Waiting to see if Dimitri and Juniper show up. Just waiting.

After what feels like an hour, we hear something outside the window, and a grappling hook sails in through the opening.

“What’s going on in there?” the same guard growls. “Don’t make me come in there.” He seems too preoccupied with his game to bother, which is good for us, I guess.

Soon a gloved hand appears over the windowsill, then the rest of the intruder appears. It’s Juniper. He puts a finger to his lips and moves closer to investigate our chains. He whispers, “I’m going to need the keys to unlock these. The holes are too small for my lockpicks. Hold on.”

As he speaks, another person appears at the windowsill. It’s Dimitri! I’m so happy they’re both okay.

“But now you’re in here with us. What good will that do?” I respond quietly enough that the guards can’t hear.

Juniper examines the lock to the cell door, then he nods. “I can work with this.” He fiddles with the lock from the inside until we hear a click. “Wait here. We’ll search for the keys to your chains.”

He and Dimitri sneak through the doorway, sliding the cell door closed just enough that it looks fully shut. If any of the guards look this way, they’ll see only prisoners who are properly secured and a closed cell.

I watch with bated breath as the two sneak past the guards, crouching in the shadows behind them as they lift the keys from the wall. I only release my breath when they reenter our cell.

Most of the others are waking up now, leaving only one still passed out. We’ll have to carry him if he doesn’t wake soon. Juniper unlocks each of our shackles, and I flex my wrists. They’ve gone numb from hanging there all that time.

“We need our weapons. I won’t leave my bow.” I motion toward the chest where they put our belongings.

Thankfully, we left the horses outside this town. It would be hard to do a jailbreak and steal our horses back, and this journey would be much longer on foot.

“Then let’s get them. How many of us will it take to carry them? About six? The rest of you must exit through the window and meet us where we tied the horses.” Juniper picks me, Dimitri, and a few others to lift the weapons, sending Ginkgo and the rest of them down the grappling hook. Hopefully, they can sneak out undetected. I worry that leaving them without weapons will endanger them if they’re discovered, but I guess sneaking all of us past the guards is even more risky. Surely, the queen’s enforcers are trained to fend for themselves if disarmed.

We close the cell door behind us and tiptoe to the chest on the far wall. Even with as quiet as we’re being, I’m tense at the thought of discovery. Yet against all odds, we get them all and

strap them to our backs and hips without alerting the guards. We must look so absurd with the amount of weapons each of us carries.

It's when we descend the tower stairs that the alarm sounds, and then we're running.

* * *

We almost make it to the city wall before we're cornered. Nearly a dozen soldiers and guards surround us, and one well-dressed faerie steps forward.

"Well, that wasn't very nice," the fae clothed with extravagance says. He has dark blue wings, darker than the night sky, and skin black as coal. "What do you think, Alder?"

"Not nice at all, Your Grace," a faerie who must be Alder replies, his thumbs in his pockets.

"You come to my town as honored guests and leave in such a hurry." The first faerie, who I presume is the mayor, paces in front of us.

Next to me, I watch Dimitri's eyes narrow at him, then he glances at me. I've seen that look in his eyes many times when there's been an assassin or threat in the castle in Feristle. It's the look of a man who will protect what he loves at all costs.

Suddenly, my love's hands begin to glow.

"That's new, isn't it, Alder?" the mayor says, nonplussed. He stops pacing long enough to examine the glow, a curious and even covetous gleam in his eyes.

"Back off," Dimitri warns. "I have no idea what this will do, but I'm eager to find out."

Well, that was hot. Dimitri was cool before he became fae-blessed, but he's at a whole different level now. I'm impressed.

I watch as my love raises his hands threateningly, and the soldiers and guards exchange uncertain glances. One of them, whom I assume is the captain of the guard based on his many medals, steps in front of the mayor, blocking Dimitri's access to him.

The mayor, in arrogance or foolishness stepping around the captain, levels a glare at Dimitri. “You lot aren’t going anywhere. Barlow’s men have offered a sum of gold for information on strange travelers. Until we know what he will want to do with you, you’ll stay as honored *guests*.” The emphasis he puts on the word “guests” feels malicious.

The name Barlow sounds familiar. Wasn’t that the name of the faerie who wants to transform the blight into something even more sinister? Isn’t that the faerie who opposes the Seelie Court? And isn’t he the one who stole my sister away in the middle of the night? From the dark look on my love’s face, I can tell he recognizes the name, too.

I’ve only ever seen that look on Dimitri’s face once before, and it was when Mother had one of the servant women beaten in Feristle. The queen caught her giving some of the royal family’s meat to two impoverished children who were begging outside the castle walls. We were soon to have a banquet in honor of a visiting dignitary. Mother was angry because that meat was for him.

There are many things I do not agree with her on, but I had never openly expressed my distaste for Queen Laurel until that night. Dimitri was even more upset, but he could do nothing for fear of incurring her wrath. Though, I knew he wanted nothing more than to protect the poor woman.

The young servant was beaten and fired. Because she had fallen out of good graces with the royal family, no one would hire her. I never learned what happened to her, but I imagine it wasn’t good.

Dimitri’s resolved expression is much like his expression from that day. He looks as if his only desire is to protect. This time, I don’t think he’ll stop himself from doing so. If we weren’t in such a dangerous situation, I’d kiss him right here and now.

His expression stormy and dark, he says in a steely voice, “I don’t think you want to do that, friend.” Raising his hands, he points them at the mayor.

“That would not be wise,” the mayor responds ... right before Dimitri fires.

A bolt of white light leaves his hand and plants itself directly in the mayor’s chest. Comically, the mayor looks down, as if he expects to find nothing. On an exhale, he breathes, “*Oh.*” Then the light embeds itself in him, causing his skin and eyes to glow, and his body ... for lack of a better term, explodes into mist. Mist which covers the soldiers nearby.

Yuck.

Dimitri stares at his hands, as if he doesn’t understand how he did that. I don’t understand it either, but there’s no time to waste. Not with the guards and soldiers shouting as they are. We run as they rush us, hoping the rest of our party made it out okay.

We have all the weapons, and they have the clothes on their backs. As we near the gates, though, we’re in luck. Ginkgo and the others are hiding behind a hut to the left of the exit. We toss them their weapons and watch the gate slowly closing.

“We’ll never make it,” I whisper.

“We may not have to,” Dimitri responds, the glow in his hands returning to light up the night. He throws another bolt of light at the gate, which explodes, just not as dramatically as the mayor did. I shudder at the vivid thought.

Every last one of us rushes out, the guards on our heels. As we escape, Dimitri turns and fires another bolt at the arch above where the gate stood. It strikes true, effectively toppling the structure and blocking the path of the remaining guards.

Only four of them made it outside of the city before the collapse. Yet after they see how outnumbered they are and the devastation our group is capable of, they back away, leaving us free to run to our horses. My heart thuds hard in my chest as we crash through the woods toward the place we tied them.

Buttercup waits where I left her, nickering at me as I approach. “Hey, girl,” I whisper. “You ready to ride faster than

the wind?”

She touches her muzzle to my cheek and then angles her body toward me. *Maybe these fae horses really do understand language*, I think as I mount her quickly. We take off, leaving the strange cliffside city of Ledge wood far behind us.

Good riddance.

As Dimitri and I ride side by side, I look over at him, exhilarated by our escape. There was never anything so exciting happening in Feristle, nor would Father let me do anything as reckless as leaving the kingdom. The dangers we’ve become involved in are intoxicating, perhaps even addictive.

As my eyes meet those of my love, I ponder how this quest is full of firsts for me, and perhaps it could be full of firsts for us both. Dimitri’s eyes soften, and he smiles.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Stolen Kisses Under the Stars

“SO, WHY DO you think Barlow is searching for ‘strange travelers?’ Do you think he knows about us and our quest?”

Dimitri’s words rouse me from my daydream. I don’t know if he’s talking to me or not, but Juniper is the one to respond.

“Anything’s possible. Either way, we’d do well to avoid cities from here on out.” The enforcer sharpens his blade with his whetstone as he gazes absently into our campfire.

My love blows out a breath. “Well, I’m going for a walk.” Turning to me, he asks, “Care to join me?”

I take the not-so-subtle hint and stand up. Behind us, Juniper calls out, “Don’t wander too far. These woods are dangerous at night.”

“We won’t,” Dimitri assures him. Then he takes my hand and leads me away from the group. Once we’re out of earshot, he kisses my temple and whispers, “I feel better able to protect you now, but I still don’t like this. First, Barlow took Princess Serena, and I have to wonder if he is after you next. Juniper’s right. We should avoid cities. I’d hide you away entirely if I could.”

“You’ve trained me well. Can I not handle myself?” I reply, straightening his tunic. The moonlight reflects off of the buttons as I refasten them.

“Enough forces can overwhelm anyone.” Dimitri lifts my chin, so I’m looking into his eyes. “Promise me something.”

“Anything,” I breathe.

“Promise you won’t do anything foolish. I couldn’t bear to lose you.” He gazes at me so intently, I wonder if he’ll kiss me. When he doesn’t, I realize he’s still waiting for my answer.

“I promise.”

And then he does. His lips find mine with skillful precision, and I'm more lost than I am found. But he's found a way to my heart like no one else has. He snuck in and stole it before I could protest ... much. I love him more than my own life, and I'm sure he feels the same.

I return Dimitri's kiss with reckless abandon, throwing my arms around him as our bodies meld together. Only pausing to breathe, I tangle my fingers in his black locks. I'm drowning in his passion, and if I go under, I'm not coming back up.

When we finally break apart, he pulls me into his chest. "I love you, Shay. More than you can fathom."

"And I love you, Dim. More and more each day."

"We should head back," he says, and he kisses me once more, this time briefly, sweetly. I allow him to pull me by the hand back to our encampment, where Juniper grins at us.

"Have fun?" Ginkgo asks, feigning innocence.

They must have heard us with their superior fae hearing.

My face has got to be red as a beet. Dimitri rolls his eyes at them, but I avoid their eyes entirely. I'm not sure I'll ever get used to public displays of affection. Not after having to hide our love for so long anyway.

"You guys hungry?" Camellia, one of the female faeries who came with us asks, taking pity on us. Her fire-red hair is secured in a ponytail, and she wears a simple violet tunic over tan breeches. Her skin is tan like a human farmer's, and her eyes are a vibrant moss green. "It isn't much, but there's carrot stew with potatoes and herbs. There's bread. No butter, unfortunately, but we have apples for dessert."

I offer her a grateful smile and sit down. "That'd be great."

Camellia dumps some stew into a bowl for me and hands me a plate of pandemain bread and sliced apples. I dip the bread in the stew.

Without waiting to be asked, Dimitri plops down next to me and rests his arm upon my shoulder. "After this detour, how long do you reckon it will take us to reach the edge of the

Northern Mountains?” he asks Juniper as Camellia fills a bowl for him.

“We went out of our way for the healer, so it set us back a little,” the enforcer responds, chewing his apple slices. “Ledgewood was on the other side of the Impassable Pass compared to our destination. I’d say we could cut through there, but it’s called the Impassable Pass for a reason. The place plays tricks on your mind, not to mention the Unseelie creatures lost to time that make it their home.

“Backtracking through Ledgewood would be the quickest way, but we won’t do that for obvious reasons. That means we go forward, edging around the Impassable Pass. It will take us twice as long, but it’s the safest.”

“You guys should have left me to the boulie,” Ginkgo grumbles. “This puts us way behind schedule. There won’t be enough food to last us if there are many more delays.”

“You were injured while protecting the secondborn,” Camellia interrupts. “Of course we wouldn’t leave you to that fate. She is most important, but you are also important. We need all of us well if we are to succeed on our quest.”

“She speaks the truth,” my love affirms. “And I, for one, will be forever grateful.” He gazes at me with unfettered adoration as he speaks. His gaze warms me, and I have to catch myself before I get lost in him again. Now is not the time, nor is this the place.

Pulling my eyes from his, I look at Ginkgo. “You’d better listen to them and stop this nonsense. Don’t let those doubts of your importance take root, for if you allow them to grow, you will begin to question not only your worth but your actions. Doubt will cause you to freeze in moments that you must act.”

“Wise words spoken like a true queen,” Dimitri says, kissing the back of my hand, and shivers go through me. “Are you cold?”

“I’m actually quite warm.”

Dimitri smiles knowingly at me before saying to the group, “We should all get some rest. It sounds like we have a

lot of time to make up tomorrow.”

“Most certainly,” Juniper agrees. “To bed, everyone.”

We roll out our bedrolls and attempt to sleep. The ground is harder than the soft beds I’m used to, but it’s getting easier to sleep on it. The light of the fire dances behind my eyelids, and the crackle lulls me until I drift off.

I didn’t know Dimitri had settled next to me, but I briefly wake in the middle of the night to his arm wrapping around me. Sighing, I settle into his chest and ignore the thoughts of what Father would think if he saw us now.

Father can wait. They can all wait. I won’t blame myself for this moment because tomorrow isn’t guaranteed.

* * *

We head out as soon as we eat breakfast. There is a lot of ground to cover, and we won’t be stopping to eat until dinnertime. Therefore, everyone eats enough to last, but we don’t want to be too sluggish, either. It’s a delicate balance I don’t think I’ve mastered. However, the fae seem to have it perfected.

I, for one, am tired. Despite how peaceful it was sleeping next to my love, my rest was fitful. I had multiple nightmares.

First, I dreamed of the night Serena was taken, only instead of Barlow, it was the boulie that took her. Then I dreamed of the boulie scratching Dimitri and watching my love die. I also dreamed that Father sentenced my love to death, but instead of a public execution, he sent the boulie after us.

The last dream felt different, though. I saw a woman with long silver hair and pointed ears. She didn’t look like any of the fae I’ve seen. If I had to guess what she looked like, I’d say she looked like an elf. She was tall and slender, and she wore a gold-embroidered dress with velvety green material. Her angular face was only brightened by the slight curve of her lips. She raised her hand to me in greeting right before I woke up.

Now that we're on the road, I make sure to pet Buttercup's neck every few minutes. It calms both me and her. Her chestnut coat gleams in the sunlight under the blue trees. We ride at a trot for a long distance, but it doesn't seem to tire these horses. Dimitri's black gelding, Lightning, easily keeps pace with my mare.

"Did I ever tell you about the time my brother, Dylan, got caught kissing a girl from the neighbor's farm?" my love asks me, making conversation.

"No, you didn't. What happened?" I'm intrigued. Dimitri doesn't talk about his family much. Ever since they sent him off to the capitol to train for the army, he's barely seen them. It's a sore subject for him, so I haven't asked many questions. All I know is they couldn't afford to feed him, and they thought the army would give him a better life.

It certainly led him to me. As painful as it is for him, I'm glad it happened. I know it's selfish, but it's true. Now that I have him, it's hard to imagine life without him.

"He was sweet on the girl who lived at the next farm over. He said her brown hair and brown doe eyes slew him as easily as her wit. After a few weeks of debating himself, he finally worked up the nerve to court her. But he neglected to ask her father's permission.

"Let's just say her father talked to our father, who then forbade him from seeing her. She had other ideas. She wanted to run away with Dylan and elope. Not only did he not have the courage to approach her for weeks, but after he did, and she proposed the elopement, he delayed agreeing to marry her. He was a coward, and it cost him."

"What happened next?" I ask.

"He waited too long. Another suitor came, and this one asked her father's permission. He was wealthy, much wealthier than we were. Her father forced her to marry for the gold. In the end, she came to love her new husband, and Dylan regretted not jumping at the opportunity."

“How sad.” I wonder what it would be like to elope with Dimitri instead of being forced to marry whichever match Father chooses. Father would likely pursue us to the ends of the earth before he’d let us get away with that.

“I guess the reason I bring this up is ... I don’t want to make the same mistakes. It would be foolish to waste what time we have when the threat of arranged marriage hangs over your head. I’m not suggesting we elope because I know the king would punish us both for that. But what if we simply ... stayed here? In Faerie? We talked about it before. Before all this happened. Can we not live a decent life here, despite its dangers?”

“Even though Father would never chase us here, he could still send his men. We would always be running, always hiding. We’d never be safe from his wrath, Dimitri. And I’ve seen his wrath. I don’t want to be on the receiving end.” I sigh, dejected. “I think our best option is to continue as planned. If we can save my sister, perhaps Father will think better of you. And if we can save Faerie, perhaps Queen Ash could grant you the title of prince. Then Father might consider you worthy. He could even view it as brokering an alliance between kingdoms, just not the kingdoms he initially considered.”

Dimitri ponders that for a moment, then he says, “How about we revisit the topic later?”

“I can agree to that.” I turn back to petting Buttercup, who raises her head proudly.

We come to another valley of sorts, and as soon as we break the trees, I see them. In the distance are the Northern Mountains. They look deceptively unimposing from here.

“Well, we’re going in the right direction at least,” Dimitri says. “It’s hard to tell how far away they are from here, but we’re making progress.”

“I’ll take it,” Camellia says, nudging her horse on.

The valley before us is immense. It must span at least twelve miles. And it’s getting dark. We’ll need to make camp here for the night. There is nowhere to make cover. Since we’ll

be exposed, we'll take turns keeping watch. Dimitri and Juniper will take the first and second watch, while Rowan will take the third watch.

Something in the air feels wrong, though, and we're all on edge. The birds are quiet, and the horses are uneasy. The breeze smells a little ... rancid.

I lie down, but sleep doesn't come. I'm still attempting to rest when I hear Dimitri shout one word: "Troll!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Distractions

I TURN AND see one troll pushing through the woods we just left. Then another and another more appears until a total of six thunder toward us. There is no way we can fight off that many. The troll we stole the magic bow from takes up their rear, led by an ugly female troll. I only know it's him by the blindfold over his eyes. They all look equally disgusting and mushy.

“What are our options?” I ask Juniper, not looking away from the trolls. They lumber closer and closer.

Dimitri is the one who answers. “I'd say we run or die. Since I'm not in the mood to die today, I vote we run.”

“Yes, definitely run,” Juniper agrees, also not tearing his eyes from the threats that approach us. They are surprisingly fast for such fat, short-legged beasts.

We abandon most of our things except our weapons and what's been packed already, and we flee on the backs of our tired, terrified horses. There's nowhere to go except the Impassable Pass. Ignoring the shiver of dread running up my spine, I lead the way into the forbidden place. The trolls pause outside the entrance, but they don't follow us in. Instead, they stand outside, growling, drooling, and beating clubs against their chests. It takes everything we have to keep the horses from spooking at their roars.

Under the veiled moonlight, it's hard to see very far in front of our faces, but we have no choice except to walk further into the Pass. It's as if all sound ceases between the high walls. They loom more than fifty feet above our heads on either side of us, reaching to block the already thin light like menacing stone arms. It feels like a cage.

I shudder, and it's not just from the cold. Dimitri glances at me in concern, but I shake my head at him. I won't put voice to my fearful thoughts.

We dismount our horses to lead them through the pass, as it's rather narrow at this point. They seem as uneasy about this place as we are.

"Be careful here," Juniper whispers to the group. "The Pass will try to convince you to doubt your own mind."

As if on cue, a cold, feminine laugh rumbles in the night.

"Did you hear that?" I whisper to Dimitri.

"Hear what?" he asks.

"Never mind. I thought someone laughed." I shake myself and pull my traveling cloak tighter about me.

Then more and more sounds assail us, some we all hear and some only one of us hears. We're on guard as we push through the Impassable Pass, none of us taking our hands from our weapons. I advance with my magic bow drawn and an arrow nocked. The light of the moon glints off of the golden leaves on its yew frame, and I hope that it doesn't attract any unwanted attention.

I still haven't come up with a name for the weapon, but there will be time for that later.

Then we hear it: the clacking of bones. A woman steps out from around the corner, laughing that cold, feminine laugh, but this time, she makes it sound sultry. There is nothing sultry about her. She's little more than stretched skin over visible bones. Even her long, dark hair lacks luster and falls in matted twists to her waist. Her nails are yellow from age and filth. They are curled and pointed like talons. Her eyes are cloudy, and one would think she'd be blind, but she looks straight at us with her incalculable depths. And then she smiles, a horrible, gruesome smile full of rotted teeth.

"My friends," the wraith says with her slimy and seductive voice.

"Beautiful," the males say as one, almost as if they're in a trance. They can't be seeing what I'm seeing.

"Don't listen to her!" I call. "Plug your ears!"

But it is I that the men choose not to listen to. They step toward the wraith like they're starved, and she is the first meal they've seen in days. One of the male faeries raises his arms as if to embrace her, and she pulls him into a sickening kiss. His hair fades from a burnt sienna to a shocking white, and he wrinkles like the aged before our eyes. The rest of the men look awed and eager for their turn.

Glancing at the women in our party, I see that they are as stunned and sickened as I am. I raise my bow.

I really hope this thing does what they claim it does, I think, making a silent wish.

Then I let loose my arrow.

It strikes the wraith clean in her heart, and black sludge explodes from the wound. She shrieks, a shrill, terrible, mind-splitting sound, and the men come out of their trance. They shake their heads as if to clear them. Then they truly see her for what she is and not whatever she wanted them to see. Disgust crosses most of their faces, and fear shows on the rest.

Dimitri moves closer to me and gets in front of me in a protective stance.

“There’s only one way to kill a wraith,” Ginkgo says. “You must pierce them in the heart and in the brain. Fire again! Quickly now! Before she recovers.”

I nock another arrow and release it. Again, it strikes true, piercing the foul woman in her cloudy eye. The wraith crumbles in on herself, shriveling into dust and leaving her dirty, ripped nightgown where she previously stood as the only evidence she was ever there.

I think I have a name for my bow now. I’ll call it Wraithbane. Slinging Wraithbane over my back again, I absently pet Buttercup. I’m not sure if I’m doing so in order to calm her or me. Maybe both.

The fae horses are certainly loyal. The horses in Feristle would have fled during a scene like that, but these horses stayed. Granted, they did so while shifting around in fear, and

they made enough noise to draw the attention of every living—and undead—thing in here.

“Disgusting creatures, wraiths,” Juniper growls, spitting on the ground. “They’re made when a woman is betrayed and killed by a man, and they spend their entire existence exacting vengeance on any men they cross paths with. It doesn’t matter to them if the men they kill never harmed a soul. We’re all guilty in their eyes. We should continue on before any more show up.”

“Aye,” says Ginkgo. “Move out.”

We keep going, but what we just faced unsettled us, and we remain eerily quiet. The only sounds are the clip-clopping of the horses’ hooves and the shuffling of our footsteps. Until the scraping noise sounds out, that is.

“What is that?” I ask.

“Shh,” Juniper shushes. He points to a ledge above us, where a strange creature stares down at us with round, glowing eyes. It almost looks like an imp, but it’s twice as large. The creature watches us as we tiptoe by.

I’ll be glad when we’re out of here. I thought the rest of Faerie was full of peril, but the Impassable Pass seems to exceed my wildest nightmares. And I’ve had many nightmares.

We somehow creep past the giant imp without rousing its ire, and we come to the end of the ravine. But when we exit the gorge, we find ourselves in a large canyon with many offshoots.

“Which way do we go?” I whisper it, but my voice echoes nonetheless.

Dimitri steps forward. “I may have the answer to this. The passage over there feels less evil.”

“Feels? Do you have a sixth sense you haven’t told me about?” I ask, annoyed.

“You seem to forget I’ve been fae-blessed, too.” He winks at me, and I roll my eyes at him. If he wants to play gallant

knight and lead us out of this wicked place, he can be my guest. I'll believe it when I see it. I know *I* don't have a clue which path to take.

We follow Dimitri, and I silently hope he's right.

* * *

My love leads the way with his now glowing hands. It's darker in this passage. The stone meets in the center about thirty feet up, blocking out the light of the moon and stars. We left our torches back at the camp, but Dimitri's hands work just as well.

They work well in other ways, too. I blush as my thoughts turn to our kiss under the stars the other night. Now is not the time to be distracted. But Dimitri is *very* distracting in a wonderful sort of way. The way he charges into danger ... I could follow him anywhere. But he tends to follow me.

My love glances over his shoulder to see if we're still with him, and I school my face to hide my desire. No sense in *me* distracting *him*. I don't think I fully succeed because he gives me a knowing smile before he turns back around. My breath catches at his cocky grin.

But seeing Dimitri's strength and courage takes me back to a time when the kingdom on our southern border wanted to expand its land ... right into Feristle.

My father had sent Dimitri to the front lines. I was so worried about him, but he was ready to charge right into the danger, determined and unafraid. The whole time he was gone, I paced the library in the abandoned wing of the castle in Feristle, biting my nails. Until the horns sounded, signaling the troops' return.

Then I rushed out, trying to appear unconcerned and under the guise of welcoming the troops home. I did my best not to let my anxiety show how worried I was for my combat trainer. It would have been awful if I showed an indication that we were as close as we were. Our secret love was only safe if it was, well, *secret*.

But then I saw him in the crowd. The tension instantly fled my body, and I unclenched the fists that clung to the skirt of my gown. It was like breathing for the first time.

I didn't immediately go to him, though. Aside from my brief smile at him, I gave him little attention. Instead, I thanked the many warriors and soldiers individually. When I got to my love, I squeezed his hand tighter than the others but otherwise thanked him the same. Nobody could have told the difference.

Later, we met in our secret place in the library. After embracing each other for a long time, he told me of his journey. The way he described the battle . . . I will never forget it. He said he'd never seen so much death and that it looked like the ground was bleeding. I shuddered then as I shudder now at the memory. But he didn't sound scared then, just as he isn't afraid now when facing these dark passages.

He leads us into the one he says seems less evil, inch by inch. It's quiet save for our footsteps and the sound of running water. There must be a brook ahead.

We dare not rest, not after the wraith, which means it may be a long night. I know I'm near to exhaustion, and sitting a moment feels like a temptation too great to refuse.

Then, around a turn in the passage, we come to the source of the water sounds. Flowing from high above us is a miniature waterfall of murky water, misting and making it hard to see further than our hands in front of our faces. A growl echoes in the narrow walkway, raising the hairs on my arms and sending chills down my spine.

"What was that?" I ask, jumping.

"I have a feeling we don't want to find out." Dimitri leads us on, but we keep our eyes wide open for the threat.

The air gets crisper and cleaner as we tread on, but the source of the growl doesn't show. Instead, we hear strange music, haunting and melodic. It makes me want to weep. A woman's voice sings what could be a lament. I barely resist the urge to turn back and find the source of the singing. If not

for Dimitri's steady hand on my arm, I would have. The faeries in our party grit their teeth.

Eventually, we make it to the other side of the passage and step out into the open air. Dimitri was right; this was the way out. Boy, am I thankful to be out of that creepy place. It feels as if a fog lifts from our minds the moment we exit the Pass.

There is no sign of the trolls from where we're standing. What we can see is that we've covered a great distance in just that short time in the Impassable Pass. As unlikely as it seems, we must be only a day's journey from the Northern Mountains now. They loom before us, thick and threatening. Nothing about them is inviting.

"Let's make camp," Juniper says as he gathers wood for a fire.

We left most of our tents and rolls behind during the troll attack, so it's sleeping on the bare ground for us. I'm not enthused, but I'll live. Unfortunately. This part of the quest almost makes me miss home.

When we're settled, Juniper gets everybody's attention. "We need to discuss the possibility of dragons. The Northern Mountains are one of the few places that dragons still thrive, and it is highly possible we will face one. Perhaps even more than one. If that happens, we must be prepared."

I should be afraid, but I find myself intrigued by the idea of facing a dragon. They are creatures of legend in the human realm, mere stories told to entertain or to frighten children. I never thought to see one in my lifetime. But if Queen Ash could face a dragon and live, then the group of us can, too.

I recall a night many years ago when my sister, Serena, told me a bedtime story involving a dragon. She was thirteen at the time, and I was seven. She told a tale of a beautiful maiden forced to cook for a dragon and clean its scales until a handsome prince slew the beast and rescued her. My sister, of course, told it as if she were the maiden.

I remember pulling the covers tight as she described the dragon's horrid teeth and foul breath, and I can't help picturing

dragons being just as she described. It's plausible, and I can't shake the image.

The memory saddens me because I know now that Barlow has kept Serena enslaved all this time. If there is any hope of rescuing her, I must recover the bitterroot and defeat the blight. It's odd that we haven't seen as many of the void-like creatures the farther away we get from Careny, and it makes me wonder just how much attention Barlow is focusing on the Seelie Court. What could his intentions be toward Queen Ash and her fae?

"So," Juniper says, pulling me from my thoughts, "dragons have a few weak spots. The armpit is the most sensitive, but the eyes and wings are also delicate. If you can hit the armpit, however, a lucky arrow can burrow its way into the heart. But beware the fire. Most dragons can breathe fire so hot it will melt metal instantly.

"Their eyesight is good, but they can't detect movement well. If you move around, you might confuse it. Moving around is also a good idea because the more you move around, the less likely you are to get burned." Juniper pauses to stoke the flames of our fire. "Now, we should eat. There's some *spatkis* left, but we'll need to forage for more food tomorrow."

The fae dish of salad leaves with berry pudding is good, but it's not as filling as the bread loaves we left at our previous campsite. Yet even my lingering hunger isn't enough to keep my eyes from closing now. After a sleepless night traversing the Impassable Pass, it's easier than expected to fall asleep. And when I dream, I see the Elven woman again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Vision

THE ELF'S SILVER hair frames her face and makes it appear fuller than her slender body implies she should be. Her pointed ears stick up from between its folds. She still wears that green floor-length dress, and a silver circlet that looks like a crown of leaves rests upon her head. She raises one hand to me, palm forward, as if to wave at me, and then she speaks. Her voice is like life itself, and it is so lovely and pure that what she says almost does not register.

"I'm glad you've come," she says. "I've waited a long time for you."

"Who are you?" I ask, wondering at how real this dream feels.

"My name is Siobhan. I am queen of the elves."

Queen of the elves? What could the queen of the elves want with me?

"You are nearing my sacred mountain," she continues. "Long have the elves been absent from the world. The First Great War was bloodier than we could stand. But another war is coming, one which we cannot sit out. If we do, there will be no world to return to."

I am awestruck. A real elf! But then what she said hits me. A war is coming?

The Elven woman goes on. "You must climb my sacred mountain and light the candle in the cave at the tallest peak," she says. "It is a signal to the Elves that it's time to come home. When you light it there, it will light its counterpart in our domain."

Finding my voice, I say, "How will I know which mountain is yours?"

"It is the one whose top light always touches." The Elven woman smiles then, a radiant bright-white smile that brings

even more warmth to her eyes. "I look forward to seeing you."

I wake then, softly and gently. Everyone else still slumbers, even the sun, which has not yet risen. The sound of my love's soft snoring reaches me, and I smile, stretching. When my stretching snaps a twig beneath me, Dimitri rouses to my left. Instantly, he's alert. I wish I could fully awaken as fast as he can. Eyes narrowed, he scans the area.

"It was just me, my love," I tell him, smiling sweetly at him and brushing the hair back from his eyes.

Dimitri relaxes again but doesn't try to go back to sleep. Kissing my forehead gently and nuzzling me, he whispers, "What are you doing awake?"

His beard has grown out since we left for Faerie several weeks ago. It makes him look older and more rugged, but the prickliness makes me wrinkle my nose. "I had a dream."

It could be the seriousness in my voice, but my love sits up and gives me his full, undivided attention. "Tell me."

I launch into a description of the elf and my conversation with her, and when I'm finished, Dimitri lets out a long breath. "You're right. It seems like more than a dream. I think it must be a vision."

"A vision? I thought only fae prophets got those."

"There is more than one type of vision, my lady." Dimitri rubs his chin as he thinks. It's adorable how he does that. "How did she seem to you in the vision? Did she seem good, or do you think she had ulterior motives?"

"She reminded me of the purity of the healer in Ledge-wood, to be honest. I almost wanted to listen to her forever. There was such kindness and joy in her beautiful voice." I pause as I try to recall the powerful, melodic way her words hit me. Now that I'm fully awake, it feels fuzzy and distant. "She could only be described as good."

"Then you must do as she says. When we reach the mountains, we will look for bitterroot, but we should also try to find her sacred mountain." Dimitri kisses my cheek. "Now, you should sleep, my princess. We have a long road ahead of

us, and I doubt we will get the opportunity to rest as oft as we need.”

Obediently and rather surprisingly, I close my eyes. This time, when I sleep, I do not dream. I only wake when Juniper gives the order to break down the camp. Groggily, I get up and wander over to Dimitri, who is talking with the enforcer.

“She needs more training! I won’t have her only know how to use her powers for curing Faerie. She must know how to use them offensively. We cannot guarantee that we can protect her in battle. She *must* learn to fight with magic.” Dimitri’s arms move around animatedly as he speaks, his voice rising with passion.

Juniper sighs. “We haven’t much time, but your point is valid. Camellia is our company’s best magic user. She can train her as we travel.” He calls over the female faerie, says a few quiet words, and then they all look at me.

“What?” I ask, shifting uncomfortably.

“You’ll ride next to Camellia today,” says the enforcer. “Your mate has advocated for you to learn how to better harness your abilities.”

And that’s that. With the decision made for me—not that I disagreed with it—I gather my things, mount Buttercup, and pull up next to Camellia.

“So, what’s first on the agenda?” I’m not one to mince words, preferring to get right to the point.

“The powers of the fae-blessed are mainly used to right wrongs and cure darkness, but there must be a balance to everything,” she says, nudging her horse on. “While you have only used your abilities to heal and make things right, you can also use them to protect yourself or to deal damage.”

I wait patiently for her to continue. Seeing I have no pressing questions, she does. “With practice, the fae-blessed can create an invisible shield around themselves to block physical blows. They can also throw the same magical energy that creates shields at a perceived threat, piercing them more

effectively than an arrow or sword ever could. It is in this we must train you.”

“But I thought the fae-blessed had different abilities than the fae themselves. How do you know all of this?” I can’t help the question that springs from my lips.

“Because I was not always fae. I was once fae-blessed like you.”

My jaw actually drops. “How is that possible? How could you become a faerie?” I wish Dimitri was riding closer to us instead of up front with Juniper. This conversation would probably intrigue him.

“It is a gift given only to the most worthy of the fae-blessed, and it is highly forbidden to discuss what it entails,” Camellia says with a reverent undertone. “Know only this: that I am able to teach you if you are willing to learn.”

“I am.”

“Good. Then we’ll start with a shield. Have you ever felt like there was an invisible second skin around you?”

I think back but can’t recall anything like that. “I don’t think so.”

“Look within,” she prompts gently.

Closing my eyes and trusting Buttercup to follow the other horses, I center myself. *Look within. Look within*, I think. *What could that possibly mean?*

But before I can ponder it too long, I feel it. It’s like a membrane or layer of something *other* that clings to my body. “That’s it!” I exclaim.

“You found it?”

“Yes!”

“Wonderful. Try to expand it,” Camellia instructs.

There is silence except for the clip-clopping of the horses’ hooves. It’s like everyone is tuned into our conversation.

Okay. No pressure.

I close my eyes again and search for the membrane. When I find it, quite unsure of what I'm even doing, I think, *Expand*.

Disappointingly, nothing happens.

Okay, so that's not going to work.

"Any luck?" Camellia asks, interrupting the whole lot of nothing I'm accomplishing.

"No. It won't respond to me the way it usually does when I access my magic."

"That's because it isn't a part of your magic, Shayna. It's a part of you. Treat it like an extension of yourself," she says.

Okay. Let's try this again.

I feel for the membrane and try once more to make it move. It twitches, but nothing of significance happens aside from me feeling utterly spent. "I need a break."

"You said you were willing to learn. As your teacher, I am instructing you that if you take too many breaks, there will be no time to train before the next danger. This is the building block of your offensive abilities. If you cannot master it, there is no hope for you. Now, try it again."

Camellia has me practice expanding my shield until sweat rolls down my face. It feels like trying to use a muscle that has never been used before. We only stop my training when the company stops for a meal. I haven't managed to move the membrane much more than an inch, but it's still better than the twitch from earlier.

Soon we make temporary camp near the border of the Northern Mountains. As dangerous as the Impassable Pass was, taking it did shave off a lot of time from our journey. We are close now. Just through these woods, and we'll have reached the mountain range.

Examining the Northern Mountains, they look wild and untamed. Diverse foliage and wildlife stretches as far as the eye can see, which isn't very far, considering how tall the mountains are. The forest feels alive.

“This is the last of the *spatkis*. We’ll forage after we eat,” Juniper says as he hands out the rations. His words instantly pull me from my examination.

The food is meager, that’s for sure. Too quickly, I’ve eaten all of mine. Dimitri seems to take his time with his salad, glancing over at me every so often. I return his looks with a tired smile each time, which seems to only fuel his worry.

I’m running out of the *porchis* that Gardenia gave me for energy, but I feel like I might need it. Pulling it out of my pouch, I take a single bite. There are maybe two or three portions left, if that. I will need to find more, and soon.

Immediately, it infuses me with energy. If I had a mirror, I imagine I’d see the color return to my face, too. I flex my hands in front of me, trying to detect a visible difference to match the way I suddenly feel. It’s as I’m doing this that Dimitri’s words startle me and make me jump. I hadn’t realized he’d moved behind me.

“Are you looking for someone else under your skin?” he asks, wrapping his arms around me.

I lean back against him. “And what if I am? Perhaps there is someone else under my skin.”

“Would that it were me,” my love mumbles against my neck.

“What’s that?” I ask.

Dimitri feigns innocence. “You heard nothing.”

“Sure. And I’m a monkey’s uncle.” Winking at him, I turn around in his arms and press my lips to his.

“That would really put a damper on things,” he breathes against my lips.

“Alright. Let’s find some more food,” Juniper barks, interrupting us so that we both jump. “We’ll head into the forest. Stay close, everyone.”

Dimitri and I groan in unison. We need more quiet moments, just the two of us. I’m feeling starved of his presence. Perhaps we need to seclude ourselves when we

make camp for the night and have another moment under the stars.

Grumbling under our breath, we follow the rest of them into the wood. It isn't long before we find some food. This place is teeming with edible plants. With how much noise we make while gathering from them, I'm surprised we haven't encountered any unsavory creatures yet. But I won't complain.

That doesn't mean we stop watching for danger. This close to the mountain range, anything is possible. We're in no man's land. No one would dare try to live here, where the land and its beastly inhabitants are so untamed. We are trespassers, unwelcome and uninvited.

I've just plucked some raspberries from the bush in front of me when I feel a wrongness. My skin crawls, and I shake myself. Something is definitely watching us. When I look around, I see nothing.

But I'm not the only one on high alert. I notice the faeries have slowed in what they're doing. To the untrained eye, they are simply collecting herbs and leaves. But I see how their eyes dart from tree to tree. I watch how their hands don't stray far from their weapons.

The brush rustles. Something is coming.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Bitterroot

THE BRUSH RUSTLES some more, and everyone groups together to take a united front. Then the rabbit jumps out of the bush. I don't know whether to laugh, sigh in relief, or cry. I opt for a mixture of the three.

But the brush keeps rustling, and the rabbit hops away like a fox is on its tail.

My eyes dart around nervously, trying to find the source of the sound. "What do you think—?" I whisper.

"Shh!" Juniper interrupts. He draws his sword.

Ginkgo removes his ax from his back, and the rest of us follow suit with our respective weapons, grouping closer together. I nock an arrow in Wraithbane and wait.

We don't have to wait long.

A fox jumps out of the foliage, baring its teeth at us as it runs off toward where the rabbit disappeared.

I breathe a sigh of relief. Soon the rest of us are laughing almost hysterically at how jumpy we were over forest animals. It could have been much worse. What if it had been a goblin? I hear they are more prevalent in the north.

I look at Dimitri. He's gazing at me. We smile at each other and roll our eyes at our company's absurdity.

"Let's finish gathering rations with haste," Juniper commands. "We need to keep moving. Despite the false alarm, I still don't like the feel of this place."

I'm definitely in agreement. It feels like we're being watched. The forest is ancient, and it feels sentient. It's as if the very trees regard us, and if not the trees, then whatever hides in them. Whatever this feeling is, it's spooky.

We fill our supply packs with more berries and *spatkis* leaves, and we refill our waterskins from a nearby stream.

Nobody speaks until we get further into the forest, and when they do, it's in hushed whispers.

There is a small trail through the wood. I don't know where it leads, but we've opted to follow it on horseback, so we don't get lost in the maze of trees. Hopefully, it is just a natural game trail and not one that leads anywhere dangerous.

"You must continue practicing with your shield," Camellia says to me, interrupting my daydreaming about where the path could take us. "It is imperative that you learn this."

Silently, I nod and close my eyes, letting Buttercup follow the rest of the horses and trusting myself not to fall off. I seek out the invisible membrane I've been trying to move and tug.

Nothing much happens, but I keep trying to no avail. Maybe I'm trying too hard. It feels like the more I try to force it, the more exhausted I become. At this rate, I'll need to sleep before I can try again, and there's no time for that.

The trail leads to a beautiful, crystalline lake at the base of a mountain. Its calm waters look inviting. Up on the side of the mountain is a colossal cave. We stop at the lake to fill our waterskins.

"Where do you think we'll find the bitterroot?" Dimitri asks.

It's Ginkgo who answers. "Most rare plants like that will be at the base of the trees on the tops of the mountains. We can start there. If we don't find any there, they'll likely be in a cave."

"Like the one above us?" I ask.

"Yes, milady. But we'll not venture into a cave if we don't have to. All manner of creatures could be hiding in there. Best to stay out in the open rather than be cornered inside." He takes a drink from his wineskin and continues. "It's been centuries since I or any of Queen Ash's court have ventured this far north, so these are mere guesses."

"But you have been here," I say.

"Not to this wood specifically, but close enough."

My smile deflates a little.

“Don’t fret, princess,” Ginkgo soothes. “Every one of us has battled many foes. We’ll take good care of you. You’ve no need to worry your pretty little head.”

It’s not that I’m worried about my safety per se. But if the threats here are a lot different from those in Careny, how can those who’ve never faced them succeed? Lack of knowledge is indeed a great foe, which means the bigger danger is that none of us knows what to expect.

“We’ve tarried long enough,” Juniper says, rising and ushering us onward. I don’t think the enforcer ever needs rest. He runs us ragged.

When he leads us toward the mountain with the cave on the side, I sigh, resigned. Climbing up a mountain when I’m already tired is far from enjoyable.

We trek through the thick trees, still feeling eyes on us. The faeries walk much more quietly than Dimitri and I do. It must be in their blood. But every snap of a twig has me looking over my shoulder, expecting something to jump out at us.

As we check the bases of the trees for bitterroot, I can’t help noticing that the forest seems too still. It reminds me of the time I saw a mountain lion while riding my gelding, Braxton, outside the walls of the royal city in Feristle.

First, the wood quieted, then Braxton whinnied nervously, prancing around on his hooves. The birds and insects even went quiet. It was the silence only a predator can cause.

Then I saw the mountain lion. It was crouching in the tall weeds, stalking us. I stared at it. It stared at me. I don’t know why it didn’t attack when Braxton turned and fled, but I’ll never forget how hard I clung to him as we rode. I remember casting fearful looks behind me and watching for any signs the cat had followed us. Thankfully, it hadn’t.

The same eerie feeling fills me now, and all I can think is *predator*. My eyes dart around, but I see nothing. It’s too late

by the time they drop from the trees. I looked everywhere but up.

“Goblins!” Ginkgo calls.

There are about as many of them as there are of us. Their arms and legs are long and spindly, their torsos small and thin, and each of them wears mismatched armor. One wears a breastplate and a loincloth. Another wears nothing on its chest but has legplates on. While their armor is incomplete, each has a weapon and shield.

The goblins chitter at each other as they close in on us. Then they bang their weapons against their shields three times in unison. That must be some sort of signal because they attack.

“Run!” yells Juniper. “Into the cave!”

We turn tail. The cave is three hundred feet above us on the mountain, and the goblins are gaining on us. We barely make it inside.

Our pursuers come no closer. They chitter at each other and retreat rather than entering the mouth of the cave.

I’ve heard of this type of creature for once. They also exist in the human realm, but they’re less prevalent there than they are in Faerie. There are two types of goblins: forest goblins and cave goblins. Their names are based on their respective homes. Both are vicious creatures, but they tend to avoid each other and areas where the other type might reside.

“Bloody forest goblins!” Ginkgo spits. “Let us hope we’ve not left them only to encounter cave goblins.”

I agree with him. Hopefully, that was the last of them.

We advance further into the cave system. Inside, there are several branches, each one as dark as the next. Tree roots from the mountain above descend into the cave system from the ceiling. It’s a wonder the trees can even thrive like that, their roots exposed as they are, but Faerie is a place of nature and magic. It shouldn’t surprise me that nature can thrive in these inhospitable conditions.

The deeper we go into one branch of the cave, the warmer and fouler the air becomes. When we enter a medium-sized room within the cave, I gasp. Moss covers the walls and floors. It glows an iridescent turquoise. On the far wall, brown roots with tubers stick up from the moss.

“Is that what I think it is?” My voice is an awed whisper.

“Yes, princess. It is.”

“We’ve found the bitterroot?” I try to verify it even further.

“Yes.”

I almost can’t believe it.

Ginkgo takes out a dagger and cuts some from its root, and Juniper does the same. Now that we found what we came for, we must figure out how to escape these caves. I fear that we are terribly lost.

We’ve definitely taken a wrong turn somewhere because we end up in an unfamiliar cavern with four branches, including the one we came from.

“Dimitri?” I ask. “Any clue which direction we should go?”

“I’ve got nothing,” he says.

“Wonderful. Shall we go with the left one, then?”

“Left it is,” Juniper says, leading us on. “There’s bound to be another way out somewhere.”

We try to be as quiet as possible in case of cave goblins. But we quickly realize that left was the wrong choice. The tunnel opens up into a larger cavern with a ceiling open to the sky, where something I never thought I’d see slumbers.

The dragon’s body is long, muscular, and covered in red scales. Long black spikes run up and down the terrifying creature from the base of its neck to its tail. The deep, even breaths it takes cause its stomach to rise and fall like a tide.

We back away, trying not to make any noise, but I’m unsuccessful. I foolishly stumble over a pebble. Such a small

thing to do so much damage. The pebble skitters across the cavern floor, coming to rest near the dragon's head.

One reptilian eye opens ... and narrows. It blinks once. The dragon stretches and opens its mouth at us. The foul stench must have been its breath, and its monstrous teeth are scarier than I ever imagined.

For once, Juniper is frozen. It is Ginkgo who whispers one word: "Run!"

We try to escape the dragon's fire by fleeing back the way we came. Its roar shakes the walls almost to collapsing the cave. The heat of its flame nearly scorches our backs. Luckily, when we enter one tunnel, we find a narrow exit down the side of the mountain.

No wonder we didn't see any cave goblins in there. The dragon probably ate them.

Speaking of the dragon, it must have exited the cave ceiling because it circles overhead.

I draw my bow. Those of our company who have bows draw theirs. I can't see the dragon through the trees, and I worry that if I can't see the dragon to have a target in mind, my bow will be useless. How can it never miss the mark if I don't have a mark in sight?

I don't see the forest goblins anywhere. Perhaps the dragon scared them off. I truly hope that is the case.

The dragon roars again, an earth-shaking sound. Dimitri and I cover our ears, but it does little good. The lizard is fierce, and it is angry.

We start running down the mountain when the dragon breathes fire above the trees. The last thing we need is a forest fire. Thankfully, it doesn't seem to be aiming at the foliage below. It circles above, no doubt searching for us.

Finally, there is a break in the trees.

"Quick! Your bows!" calls one faerie. In all the commotion, I don't know who speaks.

Remembering what Juniper said about dragons' weaknesses, I draw Wraithbane and hope to hit its armpit. The others aim at its wings. I let the arrow fly.

The mark strikes true, not that I doubted it would. It hits the dragon in its armpit. The others fire at its wings, and it drops like lead, roaring all the way down. I don't think it's dead, though. Just wounded. From the sounds it's making, I missed its heart and only served to make it angry. Hopefully, it will be down for a while, though. Or would that be too much to ask?

"Great work, everyone," Juniper says to us. "We have the bitterroot. We should leave now while the dragon is incapacitated."

"There's one more thing we must do first," I protest. Then I tell them about the Elven queen in my dreams and the task she has for me.

Everyone seems awed by this, but they don't argue with me. Some even speak in reverential tones about what it could mean that the elves want to return to our world. I hear their hushed whispers and their worries about the war she mentioned. But I also hear their hope. With the elves on our side, there is more than a chance for all of us.

So, we head to the tallest mountain.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Pretending

“THAT NOISE WILL have drawn every enemy that hadn’t noticed our presence. Whatever we do, let us do it quickly,” Camellia says, glancing around.

“Why do you think Wraithbane didn’t kill the dragon?” I ask on the way to Siobhan’s sacred mountain.

“There’s nothing wrong with that bow, princess,” Ginkgo says. “I’d reckon it was your arrows. Wooden arrows against scales hard as steel? It probably broke as soon as it breached the skin. No, it’s faesilver arrows that you need. Light enough to fly but hard enough to pierce.”

“Where do we find those?”

“I wouldn’t fret about it. There be few dragons in the southern parts of Faerie, and we’ll be heading back there soon. By the time we found some faesilver arrows, we wouldn’t have a use for them.” Ginkgo cuts through the tall grass in front of him as he speaks, barely breaking a sweat.

We are nearly there now. There’s only one mountain that breaks the cloud coverage. The air is thin near here. Every inhale is painful, and my breath frosts over with every exhale.

I don’t see the cave Siobhan mentioned in my dream until we nearly run into it. It’s well hidden behind some snow-covered pines.

The interior of the cave is small. The only thing inside is a stone table upon which a wax candle stands. There’s nothing else.

Juniper takes out his flint and lights the candle. When it’s lit, a rush of wind fills the room and puts out the flame instantly.

“That was ... strange,” Dimitri says.

“It’s magic,” Camellia answers.

A translucent figure appears in the cave. Once she partially materializes, I see it's Siobhan, the Elven queen. It's obvious she's not physically present, but that doesn't stop her from interacting with us as if she is.

"Well done," the figure of the queen says. "We have heard your call. The elves sat out the last war, and some of my people believe we should sit this one out as well. But I shall send my ambassador to you in my stead. While I work on convincing my people to return to Faerie, he will prepare the way for us.

"My ambassador will meet you on the road. I must go now, but I will do everything I can to ensure you have the elves' support in the coming war."

Siobhan's image shimmers then disappears.

"That was incredible," Fir, one of the male faeries who hardly speaks to Dimitri and me, says. "A real elf!" Fir is old for a faerie, and he seems set in his ways. I don't think he likes humans much, so it's puzzling that he even came on this journey with us to begin with.

Everyone else murmurs their agreement at his words.

"Shall we head back to Careny now?" one of them asks.

"Yes," Juniper says.

We descend the mountain, moving toward where we left our mounts. They seem nervous.

"What's spooking the horses?" Dimitri asks.

"Whatever it is, we should leave before we find out." Ginkgo mounts his horse quickly, and the rest of us follow.

We weave through the trees and find our way back to the game trail. The horses are still on edge.

Then I hear the chittering.

"It's the goblins!"

"There are more of them this time!"

"Ride!"

We spur on our mounts. I don't know how they traverse through the narrow trail so well, but these fae horses are nimble. They're fast, too. I cling to Buttercup in desperation as she follows the others.

The goblins nearly surround us inside the treeline. Shaking their spears at us, their grotesque faces sneer and gnash their ugly teeth. Some of them even throw their spears at us, and one narrowly misses my cheek. I nudge Buttercup to gallop faster.

When we finally break the treeline, the horses are panting hard. They'll need a good cooldown. Sweat glistens off their coats, shining in the meager sunlight.

But we made it.

In the distance, far behind us, the dragon roars.

We're back in the valley we attempted to cross before the trolls attacked us. The sun hides behind dark clouds, and a clap of thunder shakes the sky. *Great.* There'll be no shelter from this storm.

"Can we agree not to enter the Impassable Pass again?" I ask nervously, wondering what's worse, the rain or the monsters in that wretched place.

"I don't think any of us will argue with that," Dimitri says.

Another clap of thunder hits, and his horse, Lightning, dances on its hooves. My love works to calm the gelding.

We ride at a walk to cool our steeds down, and, in the process, we put some more distance between us and the Northern Mountains. Every few minutes, it thunders again. The ominous clouds seem to foreshadow what is to come, a looming reminder that a figurative storm approaches, and it might catch us in the crossfire.

We give the Impassable Pass a wide berth as we make our way back toward Careny. After the troll attack, we lost our tents, but we are nearing where we left everything during our flight. Surprisingly, and even fortuitously, the trolls neglected to ransack our camp. Everything we left seems to be in order, if not a little weathered from exposure to the elements.

We quickly sort through our things. Now we have plenty of food and shelter from the storm. Everyone huddles in the tents as the sky begins to pour out its substance upon us. It's just in time. I feel thankful for the good luck we are having for once, after all the hardship.

While we eat and care for the horses, the faeries speak in hushed whispers about our encounter with the elf queen. None of them can believe they saw an elf. I guess if you live for hundreds of years, and elves have been gone for most, if not all, of your lifetime, it could be exciting. Faerie itself is new to me, so elves seem equally exciting as Faerie. I'm impressed but not overly so, like the fae are.

As the rain pours, my mind wanders to the thought of Careny. The pink cream Queen Ash gave me to hide my humanity is running out. If we need to go through too many populated areas before we reach the royal city, it could lead to discovery. I know everyone in our party knows what I am, but the queen was worried about others finding out. I'll need to conserve what's left.

Worry clouds my mind, and I find myself thinking of Barlow and my sister. As I fret, Dimitri sits beside me under cover of my tent. He brushes his shoulder up against me. "Hey," he whispers.

"Hey," I reply, smiling at him.

"Don't you just love the rain?" my love asks.

"Yes. Are you here to talk about the weather?"

"Why not?" he says. "Doesn't the rain make everything else look more vibrant?"

"I suppose." I peer around, noticing that the grass does look greener under a gray sky.

"It certainly makes you look ravishing," Dimitri murmurs, and I swoon. After a moment, he says, "Let's pretend."

"Pretend?" I'm not sure what he's getting at.

"Yeah. Let's pretend you're not a princess, and I'm not your combat trainer. We're in Faerie, it's lovely, and we're

regular people. Simply Shay and Dimitri.”

“Regular people,” I repeat. I’m not sure what that even feels like, but I’ll play along. “Okay.”

“So, Shay,” my love begins. “What are your goals in life?”

“Pretend, right?” I ask, knowing that as a princess, *my* goals wouldn’t matter.

“Yes, pretend.”

“I want a small cottage on a lot of land. I want five horses and four children, and I’d like to live by the sea.”

“What a coincidence!” Dimitri says. “I have always loved the sea. And the simple life. Perhaps you and I can get to know one another better, since we share such similar goals?”

“You’re silly.” I laugh.

Dimitri turns serious. “I think we could make this more than pretend someday. Tell me what you wish, and I will make it happen. For you, I will do anything.” I stop breathing for a moment, stunned by his sudden change. And then he kisses me.

I can hardly breathe at the weight of the need behind it. He kisses me like I’m the only thing that matters, like if he stops, he will run out of air.

I’m unashamed and unafraid as I dive into his kiss with reckless abandon. Because in that moment, I know I’m lost. If I didn’t belong to him before, I do now.

The kiss deepens, and Dimitri tangles his fingers in my hair. When he pulls back, he presses his forehead to mine and says, “I love you more than words can say.” Then he kisses me again, this time softly, sweetly.

“And I you,” I say, entwining my fingers with his.

By the time the horses have rested, the storm has passed. We talk with the faeries as we gather our things. Much of the camp was salvageable despite exposure to the elements.

“So, what do we do with the bitterroot now that we have it?” I ask. “How does it work?”

“It’s a long-forgotten plant and very rare. Only the oldest of us know how to use it. We’ll take it back to the royal healer in Careny. She will know what to do with it,” Juniper says.

“But I’ll be able to defeat the blight afterward?”

“Yes, if the bitterroot works as expected,” he replies, taking down his tent.

“Good.” I’m determined to save my sister. This is the next step toward that goal.

There’s no telling what Serena’s mental state is after all these years. Is she a captive? Does she have any freedoms, or do they keep her under lock and key? Is she allowed free rein wherever she is, or is she locked in a dungeon, cold and alone? Is she comfortable? How are they treating her?

These questions continually run through my head. I want nothing more than to set her free, but what will she be like when I finally find her? Will she even be recognizable? Will she recognize me? Can I reach her?

“Right, Shayna?” Dimitri asks.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” I must have been lost in my daydreaming.

“I said we would want to test out the bitterroot before going off to battle the blight. I suggested we attempt to subdue the blight you couldn’t previously defeat before we rush into things.” Dimitri narrows his eyes at me in concern.

“Oh, um, yes. That would be wise.”

He eyes me quizzically but turns back to Juniper, who says, “I suppose we could arrange that. There’s no harm in making sure it worked.”

“Splendid.” With that settled, my love pulls out his blade to sharpen it. He’s zealous about that kind of thing. When he first started training me, he told me, “If you take care of your sword, it will take care of you. A dull blade is good for nothing but the scrap heap.” That was one of my first lessons. He made me spend hours caring for weapons before he let me use one.

I get up to brush my mare. Buttercup nickers at me as I approach her. After letting her sniff it, I use the currycomb to get the dirt off her coat. The ride through the Northern Mountains, as well as the rain, left the horses filthy. Next, I use the hard and soft brushes, and I comb her mane and tail. She still needs a good wash, but she's no longer covered in muck and matted fur. Plus, her mane looks better. She nudges me with her head as if to thank me and tell me she approves.

"We should get going," Juniper announces. "We've a long journey ahead."

The company finishes packing things up, and we mount our horses, taking things at a steady walk. The sweltering sun is high in the sky. It must be around noon, and with nothing nearby for shade, there is no hiding from the heat of the day.

Camellia pulls up next to me on her buckskin gelding. "You need to keep practicing."

I groan. This is getting exhausting, but I suppose it's necessary. So, I search inside myself for that hidden layer of energy.

There.

Pushing against it with my mind, I try to expand it. It moves about two inches. It's progress, but it's not enough. In an actual fight, that could cost me my life.

"Perhaps you'd perform better under pressure," Camellia says. "I'm going to push on your shield. I want you to push back and repel me."

Does that mean ...?

"You kept your fae-blessed powers when you became full-blooded fae?" I gasp.

"Yes. Most of them remained with me. Now, focus." Camellia gives me no time to be in awe of that.

She narrows her eyes in concentration, and immediately, I feel a pressure squeezing me from every side. I close my eyes and try to get my shield up. Instinctively, the shield moves

with me, and the pressure lessens somewhat. Maybe it really is like a muscle, like an extension of me.

“Good!” Camellia praises me. “Much better. Do it again.”

We practice until I drip with sweat and can barely lift my arms. My entire body aches, but I’ve managed to expand my shield by at least a foot. I’m very proud of my progress, if not a little relieved. This proves I’m not defective. With how much effort it has taken for me to succeed at even the smallest of my fae-blessed abilities, I had begun to worry I would never learn.

When we make camp for the evening, I realize we’ve traveled a little more than halfway across the valley. The mountains are barely a spot in the distance, an unpleasant reminder of where we came from. I look away from them and focus on the flames of our campfire.

Fir, the faerie who has barely spoken to Dimitri and me, discusses the elves with the other fae. “I’ve heard stories of them, but to have seen one in person . . . it’s an honor.” His scratchy voice is like bark scraping against a windowpane. I hate everything about it.

“I’ve heard rumors here and there of those who have claimed they’d seen an elf. I always dismissed them as too much bristle leaf,” Ginkgo says, mentioning the pipe leaf the fae sometimes smoke. It’s hallucinogenic if one inhales too much. “Now I wonder if there might have been some merit to those rumors.”

“There may have,” one faerie agrees.

“I heard the elves used to be a glorious race,” Fir drones on. “Their magic was nothing like ours. They say they could charm someone to do anything, and they had a special bond with animals. Their people could convince an animal to do practically anything, and they didn’t need to train them to, either. They could use them for household needs or even create an army. Now, *that* would have been useful in the First Great War.”

“That was called persuasion,” Ginkgo says. “I’ve never seen it, of course, but I have read about it in books and

scrolls.”

“Do you think we’ll get to see them use it?”

“Friend, I’d be more worried about them using it on us.”

The group quiets as we eat. I’m getting tired of *spatkis* and could really go for some meat right about now. We haven’t had any since we came to Faerie. I’d kill for some rabbit stew. Literally.

We set up our tents and lie down for the night. It’s much warmer now that we’re farther away from the mountain range, so we put out the campfire and sleep with the light of the stars.

In the morning, we cook some spinach leaves for breakfast using the fire we rebuilt. It’s hearty and should give us energy until our next rest break. The smoke and the aroma of the meal waft through the air, reminding me of the lower district of the royal city in Feristle. Their chimneys are always filling the skies with clouds of ash, but you can smell the delicious meals they cook with food from the city market.

We finish packing our things and are just mounting our horses when we hear the roars.

“The trolls have returned! The campfire must have drawn them,” Juniper calls. “Hurry!”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Return

AT THE EDGE of the valley, the woods we race toward span from our left to our right, and the trolls come out of the trees on the left. There are more of them this time, probably at least eight. They try to cut us off as we make our dash. It's gonna be close.

The troll we blinded to get Wraithbane is with them, taking up the rear with the same female troll leading him by the hand. The Unseelie creatures' ugly, bulbous bodies flail about as they chase us. Some of them carry clubs, which they swing at the horses. So far, they haven't hit any of them, but they've come close. Our mounts' frightened whinnies fill the air.

Dimitri's hands start glowing, and I draw my bow. If we have to fight these creatures, we will. I refuse to have come so far only to be taken out by a troll.

Dimitri launches a bolt of light at the troll nearest to us, which hits it in the stomach. Veins of light spread out from where it hit the creature, illuminating what's beneath the troll's skin. Dimitri fires again and again, slowing the troll each time, and on the fourth hit, the creature explodes into mist. My love doesn't experience the same draining I do when he uses his powers.

I raise my bow and loose an arrow. It strikes one troll through the throat, which then falls to its knees with a gurgling sound.

We're nearly to the woods now, but the trolls are still gaining on us. One of them bashes his club into the hind legs of Fir's horse, which goes down with a terrible whinny. Fir jumps off and starts fighting the troll who hit his mare.

"Form up!" Juniper yells, turning his horse around and galloping toward Fir. We rush after him, bringing up the rear.

Quickly, I nock another arrow and send it flying toward the troll Fir faces.

But it's too late. The troll swings his club and knocks Fir back a dozen feet and into a tree. He lies there, motionless. I don't know if he's dead or just unconscious, but there is no time to check.

My arrow hits the troll in the eye, piercing its tiny brain, and it drops like lead. There are five of them left, including the blind troll and his mate.

Now that we've reached our pursuers, many of the faeries ride around them, using their swords to cut their legs. The Unseelie creatures' roars of pain echo across the sky. Dimitri continues shooting light at them, exploding them into mist, and I keep firing arrows.

Camellia appears to be fighting with her fae-blessed powers. I watch several of the trolls clutch various parts of their bodies, as if invisible darts hit them. *Man, I wish I could do that*, I think, admiring her fierce combat style.

Another of the faeries goes down, along with his horse. Since his head was bashed in, I know he's gone. No one could recover from that.

Readying Wraithbane, I fire another arrow, a war cry erupting from my lips. The trolls are now down to the blind one, his mate, and another female. They don't seem to realize they're outnumbered, or they don't care because they throw jeers and taunts at us while swinging their clubs.

We have them surrounded. The faeries quickly dispatch them but not before the blind troll utters a curse. "Mark ye my words," he says. "Misfortune shall follow you, and harm shall touch you. For what you have done, you will always feel a shadow at your back." Then he spits at our feet before a faerie quickly removes his head from his shoulders. The faerie curls his lip in distaste.

Frantically, the group of us rush toward Fir, who lies, broken and at an awkward angle, in front of the tree he hit.

Blood seeps from his mouth and ears, and he coughs, a horrible, wet sound.

“Fir, my brother in arms,” Juniper whispers, kneeling next to him and crossing his arm over his heart. “You have served well.”

Fir coughs but is unable to speak.

“Shhh. Rest, brother. You have done your duty.” Juniper grasps Fir’s sword and places it in his hands, and then Fir closes his eyes for the last time.

Juniper weeps.

Solemnly, we gather Fir’s body and the body of the other faerie who died. I never knew his name. Then we create a funeral pyre.

“From ash we were created. To ash we return,” Juniper says soberly as the bodies burn.

The company is sober as the pyre burns out. None of us speak. Once the last of the flames die down, we silently mount our horses and continue.

It’s a silent journey.

We avoid LedgeWood this time around, but we cannot avoid the marsh. Our boots stick in the mud as we lead the horses through. We dare not ride them in such thick sludge. The smell is atrocious.

The noises of the marsh are eerie. There’s a wailing coming from further in, ghastly and definitely not human or fae. I shudder every time I hear it because it reminds me of the wraith.

Thankfully, we encounter no boulies this time. I wouldn’t want to think of what could happen if we did. It took so long to find a healer the first time that we almost lost Ginkgo. If we had to find another healer, we might not be so lucky again.

There has been too much loss on this journey. I am grateful that Dimitri was not among those numbers. I don’t know what I’d do if I never saw his face again, never held him.

Camellia has me practice some more, while she uses her abilities offensively. I'm making progress. I even pushed her out completely this time. However, I still haven't grasped how to use my energy to fire at her.

When we exit the marsh, we're much closer to Careny than we were. We've even made it back to the north road. That means we'll probably reach the royal city within a day or two.

I can only guess at if the bitterroot will work. Wouldn't it be something if we went to all that trouble to get it, and it ended up doing nothing? I shudder at the thought. How would I save Serena then? That's what this has all been about. At least, for me. I know that Faerie needs saving, but family comes first for me. Faerie's salvation is a byproduct of my sister's salvation.

I focus on these thoughts as we make camp in the glen where the boulie first attacked us. I try not to imagine another boulie coming out of the marsh and ambushing us, but those images end up filling my dreams anyway.

* * *

I sigh a breath of relief when we see Careny over the hill. It's been a long, stressful journey, and I'm glad that this part of it is coming to an end.

We ride into the royal city to be greeted by Rose. Great. Just who I wanted to see. She's surprisingly civil, but I'm guessing it's only because we have an audience. I'm sure once we're alone together again, she'll be back to her usual thorny self. Haha. Thorny. Get it? Well, perhaps prickly is a better word. Either way, she puts on a mask of friendliness as she leads us to the castle library, where Queen Ash stands, poring over a book. I squint at the cover and see that it's a book on the politics of brownies and sprites.

She looks up as we enter and closes her book with a *thwump*. "Well? How went your quest?"

Juniper steps forward and kneels. "As expected, my queen," he says. "We faced many dangers along the way and

lost some lives, but we were successful.” Pulling the bitterroot from his pouch, he raises it, so she can examine it.

Queen Ash presses a fist over her heart and bows her head. “To the lives lost,” she intones solemnly. Then, taking the bitterroot from him, she holds it up to the light of the nearby candelabra. “You truly did it. I have not seen this plant in many years. I’d nearly forgotten what it looked like.” She hands it back to Juniper.

“You have done well,” the queen continues. “Take this to the healer, and get some well-deserved rest. You are dismissed.”

Everyone turns to leave, but the queen speaks again. “Wait. Shaylynn, Dimitri, stay with me a moment,” she says, using my alias because of Rose and the servant in the room. I guess we’re back to that now, which is okay, but I got used to using my real name on our journey to the Northern Mountains. It may be hard switching back to secrecy.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” I ask, curtsying. As a princess, I don’t kneel before other royals.

“There’s no need for that,” the queen says with a wave of her hand. “You are not one of my subjects. Now, tell me everything about your journey.” Her eyes regard me intently.

I fill her in on the events of the trip. Trying and failing to be brief, I tell her of the boulie, Ledgewood, the trolls, and the Impassable Pass. I talk about the Elven queen and the dragon. Then I describe my training and our plan to test the bitterroot’s effectiveness with the blight that sparked this whole journey. The one I couldn’t defeat.

“Well,” she says when I finish, “it sounds like you had quite an eventful time. I’m glad the spriggan’s herbs were of use to you, if only to allow you time to reach a healer and delay the effects of the boulie’s poison.” She strides to the bookcase on the far wall and returns her book to its shelves. Then she spins about to face us. “Faerie is vastly different from your human realm, isn’t it?”

I chuckle. “Indeed. I have never encountered such creatures where I come from.”

“But you held your own. You will do well in the battles to come. I agree with Dimitri. You must test the bitterroot, but I do not say this as if I believe it won’t work. I say it because I believe it will prove to you just how capable you are.” She points to the sofa across from the bookshelf. “Sit.”

We comply, and she sits regally on the chair across from us. “This business with Barlow troubles me,” she says after a pause. “You say the people of Ledgewood mentioned he was looking for strange travelers?”

I nod.

“Let us hope he has someone else in mind and has not discovered your presence in Faerie. All fae know of the prophecy of the firstborn and secondborn. If he is aware that both sisters are here in this realm, he will stop at nothing to kill you and prevent the prophecy from coming to pass. I will send my spies out to learn more about what he knows. For now, we continue as planned, and we’ll wait to meet the Elven ambassador. I’ll have much to speak with him about.” The queen rises and motions for us to do the same.

“But you must be exhausted. Go. Have your servants draw a bath, and take some much-needed rest. It will be good for you to sleep in a bed again, I’m sure,” she commands.

I can’t help but agree.

Dimitri and I return to our rooms in the castle. When I enter mine, Petal rises from the chair at the vanity. “Your Highness!” she exclaims happily. “I came as soon as I heard you’d returned. Your bath is already drawn, and it’s still warm. Let me help you out of your tunic and breeches.”

“I’m impressed, Petal,” I say, smiling at her with genuine thankfulness. I notice she’s already laid out a lavender dress on the bed, and the smell of the orange citrus bathwater wafts toward me from the next room.

My fae maidservant hurries over to remove my filthy, travel-worn clothes and ushers me into the bath. There, she

proceeds to lather my hair with a shampoo that carries a pleasant scent I can't place, but it complements the orange citrus. "I am so glad you've returned," she says. "Rose had me worked to the bone while you were away. I felt like I never got a moment's rest."

The gentle tugging of her fingers in my long, blonde locks lulls me into serenity, but I find it in me to answer her. "Rose is dreadful. She can go swallow a toad."

Petal giggles loudly. "I'd pay some coin to see that."

"Me, too." I laugh with her at the mental image.

I don't have the same hesitation at kindness toward servants that Mother does. She's not a bad person, just misguided. When I'm queen, there will be some changes.

Just because the servants in Feristle are paid doesn't mean we can't treat them with decency. You can't buy loyalty, and gold doesn't compensate for poor treatment. I aim to earn my people's respect, not their fear.

That's one thing Mother fails at. The servants fear her, but they don't respect her. They look at her with disgust behind her back. There's no loyalty. I've seen them do it, and I can understand it. That's why I haven't told Mother they do so. They don't need to be punished for rightfully detesting her pompous cruelty. Their feelings are valid.

I'll be a better queen than her someday.

"Speaking of Rose, I believe she's dropping by tomorrow. She stopped here before you came in and said something about taking you to a healer?" Petal turns the sentence into a question. "I hope you haven't fallen ill."

"Oh no," I answer quickly. "The healer is going to help us process the bitterroot we obtained on our journey."

"Well, good," she replies.

I finish my bath. Petal helps me dress in a nightgown, and I climb into bed. I'll save the purple dress for tomorrow. The queen was right; the bed feels wonderful after so many nights

on the hard ground. Sighing, I nestle into the mattress and cover up. Sleep comes easily.

When I sleep, I dream of Siobhan again.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A Rude Awakening

“GOOD. YOU’RE HERE,” the Elven queen says, smiling at me. “My ambassador was delayed, but he’s on his way. Where can he meet you?”

“We’ve returned to Careny,” I answer.

“Splendid. I’ll let him know. He can also speak with the queen. But it’s you I want him to speak with most. Being fae-blessed, you’ll have a better chance of helping us with the war to come.”

“How did you know what I am?” I ask.

“I can only communicate with the fae-blessed through dreams,” Siobhan says. “There is something about their powers that allows us to connect. You’re the first fae-blessed to enter Faerie in centuries, aside from your sister, or else I would have contacted Faerie sooner. I would have used your sister to communicate, but it seems her mind has gone dark.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, dread filling me and making my stomach feel like lead.

“She’s unreachable. She’s let darkness consume her and blocked her mind to outside influence.”

A sense of foreboding comes over me, and I remain silent at her words. What does that mean for Serena? My worst fears and questions fill my head, making a roaring noise in my ears.

Oblivious to my inner turmoil, Siobhan continues. “And that is why I’ve chosen you as my messenger. Await my ambassador. He should arrive in two days’ time.”

The dream fades, and I have no more dreams afterward. Instead, my sleep is deep. When I wake, it is to a knock at my door.

“Wake up, princess!” Rose calls with loathing in her voice, and I groan into my pillow. “I’ve come to take you to the healer. Queen’s orders.”

“More like you’ve come to make my life difficult,” I mumble too low for her to hear. Then, louder, I say, “Give me just a moment!”

Where is Petal when you need her? I wonder, throwing off my covers and swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

Thankfully, I know how to dress myself, and I got a lot of extra practice on our quest to find the bitterroot. So, I quietly don the lavender dress my maidservant laid out for me yesterday, fastening its clasps in the front. Then I put on my leather boots and walk to the door. Rose taps her foot impatiently just outside.

“It’s about time!” she says, grabbing my arm none too gently. “Come on.” She leads me down a number of halls and up many stairs to the top of a tower.

Pushing open the door, the smells of many pungent herbs and poultices greet us. A fae woman in an earthy green dress stands in front of a shelf full of glass vials in varying colors, her hands on her full hips. She has white hair and a bowed back, indicating her age. Her ears stick out on each side of her frizzy bun.

The faerie turns when the door opens. “Come in, come in,” she says breathlessly, glancing at us. Her eyes widen when she sees me, and she stares at me a little longer than I’m comfortable with.

“You must be Shaylynn,” she says after a few agonizing seconds. “I’ve been expecting you.” Then she holds out her hand. “I’m Magnolia.”

“A pleasure,” I say, shaking the hand she holds out.

“I worked through the night on the bitterroot paste. Spread it over some bread to help with the flavor.” In a whisper, she adds, “It’s quite awful.”

Magnolia hands me a glass bottle full of a brownish-green substance. It looks like an avocado that has gone slightly bad, and it smells like cow dung, even with a cork to stop the bottle. Hopefully, it doesn’t taste like it.

“Appreciations,” I manage, being careful not to thank her and trying not to wrinkle my nose at the paste.

Rose snickers behind me.

“What?” I ask her.

She glances at the bitterroot concoction, snickers again, and says, “Nothing.” But, as if she can’t help herself, she adds, “Just that I’d pay to see you ingest that.”

“Rose!” Magnolia scolds. “That’s unlike you.”

“Apologies,” my nemesis says with false contrition. “I must not have slept well last night.”

Magnolia doesn’t seem to accept the lame excuse. “Perhaps you should go to your chambers and rest, then,” she says, narrowing her eyes.

Rose got herself into that one. “I’m fine,” she says.

“It doesn’t seem so. Go rest, Rose.”

My nemesis deflates and leaves without further argument, leaving me alone with Magnolia.

“Is she causing you trouble, dear?” the old faerie asks me, her kind eyes peering into my very soul.

I debate how much I can trust her and how much trouble trusting her can get me into. Finally, I decide to confide in the fae. “A little, but it’s nothing I can’t handle. My mother may be flawed, but she raised me to know my worth. I don’t think Rose knows hers.”

It’s the truth. Mother taught me to value myself, and as a result, Rose’s bullying has little effect. She’s more like an annoying mosquito, trying to suck the joy out of me. But mosquitoes are easily swatted.

“You are very wise, child,” Magnolia says. “You will make a great queen.” She winks.

“How did you know I’m a princess?” I ask. My true identity shouldn’t be common knowledge.

“I know many things. Just like I know that you will restore Faerie.” She pauses. “You’re young. You have the world ahead of you. But you lack one thing.”

“What?” I lean forward, intrigued.

“You lack vision. You are too focused on your current struggles and fail to see the bigger picture.”

“Perhaps you could enlighten me.” I raise my brow as I invite her to continue. Magnolia could be full of it, or she could be on to something.

“I cannot give you the answer. This is something you must learn on your own, child.” She turns back to her work, effectively dismissing me from the conversation. When I realize she isn’t going to say any more, I thank her again for the bitterroot paste and leave.

Without Rose as my escort, I have no idea how to get back to my room. I try to retrace my steps and make it back, but I become hopelessly lost. After many wrong turns, I finally stop under an arch that leads to a courtyard within the castle walls. The sky above shows it’s about noon.

A blossoming tree full of rose-pink petals stands in the center. Marble benches surround it in a circular pattern, spaced about a yard and a half apart each.

Alright, I think. If I can’t find my way back, I’ll rest here a moment. Sitting on one of the benches, I breathe in the wondrous scent of the tree’s petals.

Suddenly, I hear raised voices entering the courtyard.

“I’m trying,” a male fae hisses. “It’s not as easy as you’d expect.”

“Well, try harder,” a female voice replies with obvious irritation.

I get a strange feeling, like something is warning me I don’t want to be found. So, quickly and quietly, I hide behind the nearest shrub.

Then, with no shame whatsoever, I eavesdrop.

“I know what Lord Barlow wants, but the master cannot expect these things to be instantaneous,” the male voice hisses from the other side of the tree.

“He grows impatient, Mordred,” the female replies. I think it’s the first fae name I’ve heard that isn’t based on a tree or flower, aside from Barlow. “If you cannot capture her by the next full moon, your life will be forfeit. You know what that will mean for your wife and child.”

“It will be done,” the male voice says.

“Good. See that it is.”

The sound of footsteps recedes into the distance, leaving me alone in the courtyard to think. I wipe my brow. Beads of sweat from the fear of being caught have smudged my pink makeup. Blindly, I reapply some with the jar of pink cream I keep in my satchel.

Who is this *her* that the faerie Mordred was talking to mentioned capturing? And, for that matter, who is Mordred? Perhaps the queen will know.

I wait until I feel it’s safe to leave and continue searching for a way back to my chambers. Eventually, the corridors start to look familiar. I somehow end up in the library that Queen Ash likes to spend a lot of her time in.

The queen is not there, but Dimitri is. “Hey, you,” he says, grinning at me. His face falls when he sees my expression. “What is it?”

“I don’t know yet.” I wring my hands. “Have you seen Queen Ash?”

“Not today,” Dimitri says, rising and crossing the distance between us. Taking my face in his hands, he murmurs, “Tell me what’s happened.”

I recount the events of my day, from my dream with Siobhan to my rude awakening and Rose’s snarky attitude problem. I finish with the conversation I just overheard in the courtyard. After I’ve said everything, Dimitri lets out a low whistle. “Well, then,” he says.

“Yeah.”

“This situation is dung.”

“Yeah.” Beginning to pace, I tread a path on the ornate rug from the bookshelves to the window and back. “I must speak with the queen, but if she’s not here, where is she?” I wonder aloud.

At that moment, the door opens, and Spruce enters. “There you are,” the green-haired fae says brusquely. “You are needed in the larger courtyard. Come with me.” To Dimitri, he adds, “You may come as well.”

We follow Spruce to the place where I defeated the blight in front of the enforcers, the same place they showed me all their combat maneuvers. Speaking of the enforcers, eighteen out of twenty-four of them are present.

Sycamore and Juniper are speaking together near the rack of crossbows and bolts. The table full of nets is to their left, and the grate that they hold their captives behind is at their backs.

The grate operates on a pulley system. When the enforcers wish to release the blight, they simply operate the pulley to lift it, and the grate opens.

When we enter the courtyard, Sycamore beckons us over. “Finally. Daylight’s wasting,” he says. “Juniper tells me you wish to test the effectiveness of the bitterroot.”

“Yes, but—” I start.

“Good,” the enforcer general interrupts. “Open the gate!”

“Wait!”

Sycamore looks at me with a quizzical arch of his brow but makes a gesture for his men to hold. “What?” he says gruffly.

“I haven’t eaten the bitterroot yet.” My voice comes out small.

“Well, do you have it on your person?” he asks, motioning to my satchel.

I nod. “Yes, but Magnolia said to eat it with bread.”

“There’s no time for that, princess. Just down it in one swallow.” Sycamore makes a drinking gesture with his hand.

I glance at Dimitri, who gives me a pitying look. He knows what I said about how the castle healer implied it would taste. Sighing in defeat, I pull the soupy paste out. Somehow, it looks a little more brown and a little less green than it did before. I swallow hard.

Deciding it would be best to drink it as quickly as possible, I tilt it back. It burns going down, and the horrid taste lingers in my mouth, making me gag. It tastes almost exactly as it smells, but it leaves a bitter aftertaste.

Yet once it’s down, and I’ve passed the point of gagging, I notice a difference. I feel stronger and more powerful. On top of that, it’s like I gained another sense. I can feel the layer of energy beneath my skin more tangibly, as well as sense Dimitri’s vibrant energy. It seems as if everyone else is more defined, and I can perceive the weakest points of their bodies.

“Wow,” I breathe. Dimitri looks at me in question, raising his brows, but I’m too speechless to explain what’s going on.

After giving me a moment to get accustomed, Sycamore motions me closer. “I’m going to release the blight now,” he says. “Are you prepared?”

“I feel more than prepared,” I respond, filled with boldness. And I do.

“Good. Set it loose!” he shouts.

The pulley squeals as the grate is raised. Then the same blight we fought several weeks ago in the Eastern Forest emerges.

“Crossbows!” Sycamore bellows. “Nets! Music!”

Five enforcers pull out their lutes, and that same high, fast, and enchanting tune plays again. Dimitri isn’t as affected by the music as last time, so I don’t have to hold him back. Perhaps the mystical lake granted him a better ability to resist faerie enchantments when it made him fae-blessed.

The blight seems just as affected, however, and it shrieks. These abominations hate anything that causes joy, so it's no wonder this upbeat music makes it angry.

The rest of the enforcers aim at the blight, which has flown overhead. It releases its toxins, letting them fall upon those beneath it. Those in the toxins' path are immediately weakened, their energy and magic slowly being sucked upward into the blight.

"Fire!" comes Sycamore's command.

One by one, the enforcers fire off their bolts with nets attached until one of them lands, and a net spreads over the blight like a deadly blanket. It sends an electrical current shooting through the blight's round, fat body. Then the creature descends, landing not far from Dimitri.

I advance on it at the same time that it sends turbulent thoughts coursing through my mind. Violent, intrusive, and disjointed images flood me. Pain radiates through my head, but this time, I'm ready. So, I step forward.

I don't have to tell my powers to do anything now. Previously, I would have told the blight to dissolve or to return that which didn't belong to it. This time, I can sense exactly how things work.

So, I close my eyes and touch the blight, searching inside of it while keeping a barrier of energy as a shield to protect against its toxins. Then, drawing the magic it stole from the land and its inhabitants out, I touch the ground and send the magic shooting back through the earth.

With my new sense, I can see it as it travels back to where it belongs. I watch as several magical creatures that were missing their magic are suddenly reunited with it again, and trees begin to come back to life in areas that were dead. The sickness over that area of land dissipates, and the strength stolen from those creatures and woodlands returns. It will take time for them to fully heal, but the first step is over with.

The cries of the blight as the magic is stripped from it echo in my mind. It being a creature made solely of magic, once all

of its magic is removed, it cannot survive. So, like all the others, this one dissolves, and I'm not exhausted like all the other times I've used my abilities.

"You *are* more than ready," Sycamore says, nodding once in approval. That's all the acknowledgment he gives me before moving on. "Soon, we shall launch our attack."

"If I may, sir," Juniper interjects, and the enforcer general turns to him. "I believe Shay should meet with Camellia some more to refine her talents. She may have defeated the blight that was bonded to the Unseelie fae, but there are other dangers she could face. We need her at her full potential."

"Very well," Sycamore reluctantly agrees. "She shall begin tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Elven Ambassador

CAMELLIA HERSELF COMES to my room before Petal has finished dressing me. She waltzes in as my maidservant laces my boots. “We have very little time to get you ready,” the slim faerie says. Her fire-red hair is in a double braid, and she wears a simple mauve tunic with black breeches. “Sycamore is eager to get on with taking back the kingdom, and he’ll not wait long. So, we must hurry.”

After she dismisses Petal, Camellia faces me. “Let’s see if you’ve gotten any practice in since we returned from the Northern Mountains.”

Without any further warning, she launches her attack, sending her own energy at mine like a battering ram. Instinctively, I push back to rid myself of the foreign energy. I did not expect what happens next.

To my shock, Camellia ends up sprawled on the floor from the force of my blow. She blinks slowly up at me before breaking into a grin. “That was great! Now let’s see you shoot bolts at me.”

She stands and widens her stance. Then I feel for my layer of energy and break a piece off, launching it at her. It pierces her skin, but I don’t let it go too deep. Even though it’s barely a scratch, I honestly didn’t expect to make it that far.

I call my bolt back into myself.

“I don’t think you need me anymore,” Camellia says. “How did you improve so fast?”

I try to determine what’s changed, and the only thing I can think of is that it must have been the bitterroot. Is it possible? Is there anything else I should expect to be different?

I guess I don’t answer quickly enough for her because she says, “No matter. I’ll tell Sycamore you’re ready.” Then she rises and heads for the door. Once she’s left, I sink into the bed.

We're one step closer to saving Serena. One step closer to returning to Feristle. Will Father accept me with my new powers? Will the people? What about Dimitri? Will they accept him?

Or will they fear us?

So many questions. If only the answers were simple.

* * *

The queen calls Dimitri and me to the throne room at evening. As we enter, we notice two things: the queen isn't alone, and an elf stands before her. An unbelievably hot elf.

They turn to regard us as the doors close behind us, and I try not to stare at what must be the Elven ambassador. When we reach the dais, Queen Ash says, "Shaylynn, Dimitri, this is Ardwyn, Queen Siobhan's ambassador."

"Pleased to meet you," Dimitri says cordially.

I can't get my voice to work for a few uncomfortable seconds. Finally, I manage, "Hello."

I am a complete and total idiot.

"And you as well," Ardwyn says. His voice is smooth as silk, with an almost musical lilt to it. He has the most piercing green eyes and long, straight silver hair. But he doesn't look old. He looks twenty-five at most.

You have Dimitri. Cut it out, girl.

A small, wicked part of me doesn't care, but I shove that part *deep* down until I can't hear it. Then I school my face into a bland, polite mask and wait. Despite this, I know only someone who's blind wouldn't notice him.

"Ardwyn was just telling me that Queen Siobhan will be organizing the elves to return to Faerie," Queen Ash says. Her expression is as neutral as I've forced mine to be, but there's a hardness in her jaw that isn't typically there.

"Yes, well, it is a process," Ardwyn says. "But I am here to ensure it goes smoothly on this end. It has been many centuries since we last set foot in this land, and many things

have undoubtedly changed.... Including its leadership. We only wish to prevent any clashing of the races should we return to help with the war.”

“*If* you return to help,” Queen Ash says, her tone somehow both icy and cordial at the same time.

There is obvious tension between the elf and the fae queen, so I can only imagine what they were discussing before we arrived. Nevertheless, the elf seems to be attempting civility, while Queen Ash seems to be doing anything but.

“Ardwyn asked to speak with you alone, Shaylynn,” the queen says, using my alias. “Dimitri, you may return to your room. I believe Camellia wished to test out your powers. Just ... be careful not to blow up anything ... or anyone.”

I chuckle, and Dimitri walks away, exiting the throne room. Then Queen Ash stands to leave, walking out of the room with her head held high and sweeping gracefully across the floor. That leaves me alone with Ardwyn, who I struggle to speak in front of. *Great.*

“So, you are the secondborn from the prophecy,” Ardwyn says with his lush, musical voice.

“Mm-hmm,” I reply eloquently.

He tilts his head. “You are quite beautiful for a human.”

I blush, although I don’t know if that is a compliment or an insult.

“I did not tell the fae queen this, but even the elves have been touched by Barlow’s evil. He has become something more than fae, something crueller and more wicked. The unnatural power he now holds threatens the balance of the world, and while my queen wished to say this in person, she has sent me to tell you now....

“He has corrupted your sister and her powers, using her as a vessel to spread his reach across the furthest regions of the world. And she lets him. I know that this is not something you wish to hear, but you must know that there is little hope for her. At least, not under his influence.”

I don't know what to say, so I say nothing. My heart hurts. But I find in me a resolve and an unwavering devotion to Serena. She must be deceived. This is not the sister I once knew. Barlow must be perpetuating all of it.

And he must be stopped.

“Shaylynn?” he prompts.

I know it's wrong, but hearing him call me by my alias grates at me. I want him to know my name. Can I trust him, though? I don't know the answer to that, which means it's too dangerous to risk. He could be working for Barlow for all I know.

“It's a lot to take in,” I finally say.

“I understand. Rest assured, the elves are here to assist in any way we can. Barlow's evil cannot be allowed to continue.” Ardwyn smiles, a soft, gentle tilting upward of his lips, and I can't help the smile that spreads across my own. “I shall be stationed at Careny indefinitely, and I am looking forward to getting to know you.”

Oh boy.

* * *

I exit the throne room faster than I've exited any conversation in my life. Ardwyn is too ... just too ... He's too dreamy for his own good, and I want no part in it. None. At. All.

Speedwalking back to my room, I round a corner and bump right into Rose. She glares at me and says, “I don't have time for you today, or else I'd teach you a lesson about watching where you're going. But as of right now, I'm on my way to meet someone.”

I step back to let the fae witch through, now extremely curious who could be more important than tormenting me. Letting her go, I make the snap decision to follow her.

She scurries through several hallways before entering the guest wing of the castle. I take note of each turn, so I don't get lost again. She slows when she reaches a long hall full of

doors, and I hide around the corner, peering out to see what she's doing.

Primping her voluminous red hair, extending her lime-green wings, and pushing her breasts up in her dress, she puts on a deceptively dazzling smile. Then she knocks on one of the wooden doors.

After a minute, the elaborately carved door opens, and Ardwyn steps out.

"Hi!" Rose says, her voice chipper. "I'm Rose. You're the Elven ambassador, correct?" She holds out her hand daintily as if wanting him to kiss it.

Ardwyn takes one look at her hand and smoothly clasps his behind his back. "I am. Can I help you?"

Rose stutters for a moment before making a foolish decision. Leaning in so he can get full view of her cleavage, she says in a seductive whisper, "Perhaps *I* can help *you*." Her voice is so low I can barely hear it. I only make it out because the hallway has high ceilings that amplify sound.

"I'm fine, but appreciations for the offer," the elf says, his tone even.

Rose narrows her eyes. I get the feeling she's not used to being told no. "Very well," she says. "I can tell when I'm not wanted. There are plenty of others who would prefer my company. Good day."

Ardwyn inclines his head to her in dismissal, and she saunters off in the opposite direction from the one we came, sashaying her hips as she goes. I sigh in relief that she didn't come back this way, and I'm about to leave when Ardwyn speaks.

"Come on out, little human," he says.

Crap.

I step out of the shadows and walk up to him, head low.

"Are you following me, little human?" The elf smirks, showing his dimples.

I laugh. “Heavens, no. I was following Rose, actually.” Immediately, I cover my mouth, surprised I admitted that to him.

“Now, why would you do that?” He raises one perfect brow, appearing both intrigued and amused.

“I don’t have a good reason,” I admit reluctantly.

“Surely, you must have a reason, though.”

“Well ...” Should I share it with him? Why does he want to know? “I do, but I’d rather not say.”

The elf taps his chin. “So, according to you, you’re following that rather promiscuous faerie, who just so happened to be outside my door.... And I am to believe you’re following her and not me. But you don’t have a good reason, and the reason you do have ... you won’t divulge?”

I don’t respond for a moment, and he asks, “Does that sum it up?”

I sigh in defeat. I guess he does have a right to know, since I *am* outside his door. “Okay, fine. I was following her because we hate each other, or at least ... she hates me.”

“That’s not a reason,” Ardwyn prods.

“It is if you keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” I retort.

The elf scrunches his nose. “You humans have such odd expressions. Why would one keep their enemies close?”

“Never mind,” I say. “It’s not important. But if you’ll excuse me ...” I turn to leave.

“Wait,” he says, gently grabbing my arm.

I look up at him. He towers a foot and a half above me.

“What are your plans for tomorrow?” he asks.

“I have a combat exercise with the queen’s enforcers.” I tug my arm out of his grip. “Why?”

“I thought we might discuss some things.”

The last thing I need is to be alone with him. So, I say, “That’s fine. Do you mind if I bring my ... Dimitri?”

It’s hard to put a name to what Dimitri is to me. He’s not a suitor because Father would never allow us to marry. He’s not my fiancé because I’m too afraid of Father to elope. He’s simply my love.

“Sure,” Ardwyn agrees in his musical voice. “How about after supper?”

“Fine. See you then.”

He lets me leave this time, and I retrace my steps until I know where I am. Then I search for Dimitri. When I find him, he’s practicing with Camellia.

Hands glowing, he shoots at a hay bale, which is thrown back several yards but doesn’t explode like the trolls or some of the Ledgewood residents did.

I raise my brows at him. “That’s new.”

“Actually, we learned something,” Dimitri says. “My powers only cause living things to explode. Our theory is that it has to do with the electricity in a body. Everything else?” He shoots at another bale, which goes flying. It explodes from the impact but not from Dimitri.

“You look like you’re having a blast. Literally and figuratively.” I giggle at my joke, and my love grins.

“Sure am,” he agrees.

“He’s doing very well,” Camellia says. “A real natural. Unlike someone I know.” She winks playfully at me, brushing back her red hair, which had fallen into her face. Red, green, and blond seem to be common hair colors among the fae.

“Well, someone had to upstage me at some point,” I retort, grinning at them both.

“Leave it to me to knock”—Dimitri hits another bale—“you down a peg.”

“Wouldn’t want my awesomeness to go to my head, would we?”

“No, certainly not.” Dimitri’s hands stop glowing, and he pulls me in for an embrace. “But even though my superior prowess has humbled you,” he whispers into my ear, “don’t forget that you are still, in fact, awesome.”

“Okay,” I breathe, then I chuckle. “I won’t. Not when I have you to remind me.”

“Good.” He releases me. “Shall we go, then? I believe Queen Ash wanted to see us before we sup.”

“Sure. What’s on the menu tonight?” I ask.

“I believe it’s roast corn, fried tomatoes, and legumes.”

I groan. “Do you think the fae would consider it a crime if I hunted my own food sometime?”

“And who would skin it?” Dimitri teases.

I blush. “I haven’t gotten that far yet. But I’m getting so sick of vegetables!”

“Then you’re in luck,” my love says, “because dessert is strawberry pie and apple walnut pudding.”

“Well, I guess that is something to look forward to.” I sigh, lamenting the absence of meat in my recent diet.

“If you don’t, I will.” Kissing my cheek, Dimitri leads me back toward the castle, where I’m sure Queen Ash awaits.

I try not to think of Ardwyn, and for once, I’m successful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I Need You to Trust Me

QUEEN ASH SITS behind her desk in the library/study area. An unfamiliar servant stands off to the side, holding a tray of tea. “Shaylynn, Dimitri,” the queen says, “have a seat.”

We sit in the chairs in front of her and wait. It doesn’t take long for her to speak.

“Sycamore tells me your training is going well,” she starts. “I am pleased to hear this because that means we can begin taking back Faerie from Barlow and his blight minions. And it means we can continue our plans to recover your sister.”

I purse my lips as I think about Serena.

“What is it?” the queen asks.

“Your Majesty, do you think one’s spirit can be saved and made whole if it has been broken?” I wring my hands as I ask the question.

“That all depends on the person and their will. A strong person goes through much and chooses it will not break them. Some need convincing to choose to overcome. Others still are convinced that their lot is hopeless, and nothing can force them to fight despair. What makes you ask this? Are you quite alright, dear?”

I nod, but I don’t bring up what I’ve learned about Serena. It feels like speaking it aloud to someone other than Dimitri will make it more real.

“Would you like some tea?” Queen Ash asks, gesturing to the servant. She walks forward with her tray and offers it to us.

“Are there any side effects?” I remember the tea we had at Gardenia’s, and I’m not sure how adventurous I feel today.

“If you’re asking if it’s fae tea, it’s not. Just some regular green leaf tea. It’s quite safe.”

Relieved, I accept a cup and sip it lightly, my eyes downcast.

“You look like something else is on your mind. Spit it out,” Queen Ash says kindly.

“Your Majesty...” I begin, knowing that I haven’t had a chance to talk to her recently. “There is something I wanted to bring up.”

“Go on.”

“Who is Mordred?” I ask.

Queen Ash stills, and her voice goes cold. “Where did you hear that name?”

Unsettled by the sudden shift in her demeanor, I stammer, “I o-overheard a conversation....”

The fae queen sits forward, her face severe. “Tell me what was said,” she orders, her voice full of an authority she rarely takes with me.

I tell her about the conversation I heard between Mordred and the female faerie in the courtyard with the pink-blossomed tree.

The queen seems frozen, saying nothing for a very long time. Finally, she speaks. “Mordred is one of Barlow’s many spies. He has a network of them that do his bidding. Many of them are Unseelie fae that join him because they want to see the Seelie Court, *my* court, overthrown. Mordred, however, is a Seelie fae who has been loyal to Barlow long before Barlow ever made a name for himself.”

She leans back in her chair. “Mordred’s presence here is concerning. You said he means to capture someone? There are only two in Castle Careny who could be important enough to send Mordred: you and me. We shall post extra patrols, and you are not to go anywhere without an escort.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

“Dimitri,” Queen Ash says, “you shall be one of the escorts assigned to her. I shall assign some of my royal guard as well. A guard shall be placed outside your door at all times.

A good thing we heard of this plot now, or we could have been caught unawares.” The fae queen rises. “I must see to this at once. You are dismissed.”

* * *

Our combat training exercise with the enforcers went as expected. They brought in three blights this time to see how we would function in a fight with multiple opponents. I surpassed everyone else, and Dimitri even pitched in. His powers do odd things to the blights. They seem to have a bit more electricity in their bodies than other enemies we’ve encountered because when they explode, it’s messy.

They don’t explode into mist, but the magic shoots out like some of the strange, new weapons they’ve developed in Feristle’s enemy kingdom, Luella. I think they’re called guns.

After the exercise, Petal draws me a bath, asking me questions about my day. I tell her as much as I can, but I leave out the parts about the queen and Mordred.

Finally, it’s suppertime. I am pleasantly surprised to see that, along with the vegetables and breads, there is meat on the table. Boar, in fact. I nearly squeal in delight. None of the faeries have any on their plate, so I wonder where it came from.

Dimitri and I sit down to eat. I pile a ton of meat on my plate, ignoring the dirty looks from the nearby faeries. It tastes exquisitely smoky and spiced. The flavor is unlike anything I’ve encountered. Frankly, I’m surprised the fae know how to cook meat this delicious.

I eat way more than I should, and when our plates are clear, Dimitri and I excuse ourselves to go meet Ardwyn. We planned to meet him after supper, but I didn’t see him in the banquet hall.

However, when we exit the doors, we nearly run into him. Did the elf even eat?

“Hello,” he says, smiling at me and nodding at Dimitri. “Are you ready to talk?”

No, I am not. But I lie and say, “Yes.”

We follow him away from the banquet hall and toward the guest wing. The light of the sconces on the walls casts eerie, flickering shadows as we walk through the corridors.

“How did you like the boar at dinner?” Ardwyn asks when we get to his chamber.

“Was that your doing?” My eyes widen. “I should have known,” I mutter under my breath.

“We elves do not share the same aversion to meats that the fae do,” Ardwyn says in response. “The fae revere animals as much as they revere the rest of nature. But elves understand the course of the world. Everything must eat, and it is only the course of nature that animals be eaten. They do us a service by providing their meats, so we waste none of it. What we cannot eat, we leave for the crows.”

“What an interesting way of life,” Dimitri says. “They told us elves have an affinity for animals. Can you make them sacrifice themselves for your meal?”

“It doesn’t quite work that way, but in a sense, yes.” Ardwyn barely looks at Dimitri as he speaks. His eyes are on me for the most part. “But we will have time for these types of questions later. There is an important matter to discuss.”

We give him our full attention as he continues. “Barlow may have the blight horde, and he may be using the eldest princess, but he also has the support of the Unseelie fae. And the Unseelie fae have been festering with hate since they lost the First Great War. The whispers suggest that Queen Ash is entirely outmatched. Since her life force is tied to Faerie, if she is overcome, it could mean the end of this realm. If we cannot defeat them, we won’t have to worry about the blights slowly killing Faerie. Because if Queen Ash were to fall, it would happen all at once. Faerie would simply cease to be.”

“So, should we be worried about an assassination attempt on the fae queen?” Dimitri asks the elf.

“I guess anything is possible,” Ardwyn replies. “It would be entirely foolish for Barlow and the Unseelie to kill the

queen, but they have acted foolishly thus far. I would not put it past them to believe it was a good plan.”

“So, what should we do?” I ask. “How do we protect ourselves and the queen?”

“The best protection is proper training and numbers.” Ardwyn leans back in his chair. “You’ve started on your training. I recommend you continue it, little human. Leave the numbers to the elves and fae. We will have more than enough forces to overcome Barlow and his soldiers.”

I shift in my chair as I ponder what more I can even learn. I’ve just about mastered my shield and projectile training.

“There is ... one more thing,” Ardwyn drawls in a lazy, unaffected tone. He glances at Dimitri. “Perhaps it is best we speak of this alone, princess.”

Does he know who I am, or is he using that title because he’s heard some of the enforcers call me princess? Perhaps him using my alias earlier was all a show for the queen. He did call me the secondborn from the prophecy, so perhaps he was just being tactful and not letting Queen Ash know what he knows. My heart warms a little at the thought I don’t have to pretend with him, and then I curse myself for thinking so brazenly.

What if he’s just being sneaky, Shayna? I berate myself. You don’t know this elf. You don’t know his character. Be wise, and stop acting like a silly schoolgirl.

“I’m not leaving her alone,” Dimitri says, immediately indignant. “Not when there could be a kidnapper in the castle after her.”

“She is perfectly safe with me, and what I have to say, Queen Siobhan intended for her ears only, boy.” Ardwyn narrows his eyes as he speaks to my love.

It could be about my sister, so I won’t take the risk of not hearing it. Placing a hand on Dimitri’s arm, I say, “It’s okay. You can wait just outside the door. I’m sure it won’t take long.” I turn to the elf. “Right, Ardwyn?”

“Mere minutes, little human.” He flashes a dazzling smile at me, and Dimitri grits his teeth.

Not sparing a glance at either of us, my love exits the room. I can tell he’s seething. Knowing there will be a discussion later, I sigh in defeat before turning to the unbelievably hot elf.

Don’t let Ardwyn get to you, I tell myself. Don’t think about—

“So, Shayna...”

He does know my name!

“Yes?” I say, my voice a little breathy. Hopefully, he won’t notice.

“What I am about to say may be hard to hear, but I need you to trust me.” He places his hand over mine, and I feel an electric current run through me.

“What is it?” I smile dreamily up at him.

“Under no circumstances should you trust Queen Ash. She isn’t what she seems.” Ardwyn’s voice is earnest as he gazes into my eyes so intently. I can’t help but believe him.

“Alright. I’ll be careful around her,” I say.

Ardwyn beams at me before growing serious again. “Don’t let on that you don’t trust her to anyone. Not even to Dimitri. It could be disastrous for everyone involved.”

“I understand,” I say. “I won’t.”

“Good. That was it. I’m sure your husband is waiting for you outside the door.”

“He’s not my husband,” I say, biting my lip because I very much wish he was.

“No?” Ardwyn smiles. “How ... interesting.”

My stomach does flips, and I know I need to leave before one or both of us does something to jeopardize my very happy relationship. I stand up and turn toward the door.

“I’ll be in touch, princess,” Ardwyn says at my back.

When I exit the room, Dimitri asks, “What was that about?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t say.”

Suspicion clouds my love’s gaze as he narrows his eyes at me. “That elf had better not have hit on you.”

“No, nothing of the sort.” I hope. I also hope the opposite.

“Good. You’re mine, and I won’t allow anyone to come between us,” he says with a growl, tugging me toward him. Then he kisses me possessively. It’s raw and rough and unlike any of our previous kisses. And I love it.

“He’s not coming between us,” I say when we come up for air. “It had nothing to do with that. I just can’t tell you.”

“Alright,” Dimitri says. “I trust you. It’s him I don’t trust. I don’t like the way he looks at you.”

“Me, either,” I say. And at that moment, I mean it. Ardwyn looks at me like I intrigue him, like I’m a puzzle he can’t put together, and he wants nothing more than to try. That cocky smile of his as he said how *interesting* it was that Dimitri wasn’t my husband ... I refuse to think about it.

* * *

Dimitri leaves Shayna at the door to her room, where a guard is waiting to watch over her, and he walks back to his quarters.

Inwardly, he stewes as he ponders what Ardwyn’s motive could be. If he’s after Shayna’s heart, Dimitri will never let that happen. She’s *his*, and no one is going to swoop in and steal her away.

She’s his everything, his heart, his soul, the one who drives him.

She completes him.

He would even be willing to defy his king to be with her.

Dimitri freezes. Did he just think that? *Defy his king?* Did he mean it?

He did. He would. Perhaps he will.

He paces the floor before finally sitting on the bed. Putting his head in his hands, he thinks.

Ardwyn is attractive. That's hard to deny. He sees how affected Shay is when he speaks to her, and Dimitri is sure that if that elf were to devote himself to it, he could easily woo her.

Is their love enough to withstand those kinds of temptations? He'd like to think it is.

He just needs to ensure that Shay doesn't get too much time alone with Ardwyn.

And that *he* gets more time alone with her.

She's *his*. That's not going to change.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

My Heart Is Yours

“WAKE UP, SHAYLYNN,” the guard outside my door calls, using the knocker. I groan and roll over, covering my head with my pillow. “Queen Ash has requested your presence.”

Again? I think. What could she want this time?

Sighing, I throw my covers off and stand up to dress. Donning a scarlet tunic embroidered with gold leaves and pulling on tan breeches, I quickly brush my hair. Then I exit my room and let the guard lead me to the queen.

When we enter the throne room, I see Queen Ash sitting on her throne and Ardwyn standing before her. She’s been spending a lot more time in her throne room lately. Does it have anything to do with Ardwyn’s arrival? I could be way off, but she seems to view the elf as a threat, which makes me suspicious that this is a display of power.

“Good, you’re here,” she says, offering a tight, reserved smile. “Queen Siobhan’s ambassador has requested to spend the day as your instructor.” I notice she doesn’t use Ardwyn’s name. “It wouldn’t have been right to accept on your behalf. I thought it best to let you decide, should you so choose.”

“Oh, um, appreciations,” I say to her, stunned.

“Would that be alright with you?” Ardwyn asks in his musical voice, his smile pleasant but, nevertheless, devastating.

Knowing it would be rude to refuse and feeling pressured, I nod. I don’t trust myself to speak without my voice squeaking.

“Splendid!” Ardwyn beams, and I can’t help smiling back at his exuberance. “Shall we?” He holds out his arm.

Queen Ash takes on a bored expression that looks too good to have not been practiced, but the tightening of her eyes

betrays her lack of calm. If I were queen, I probably wouldn't have liked someone swooping in like Ardwyn is, either.

I take the elf's arm reluctantly, inwardly worrying what people will think of me strolling arm in arm with him. I guess he sees it written on my face because he says, "Don't worry. I'm simply escorting you to your lesson."

Yeah, my lesson with you, I think. How did he convince Queen Ash to even consider it?

We walk down several halls until we reach a sitting room. My guard waits outside as we enter. Once inside the room, Ardwyn points at two of the chairs in the corner, the most private section of the room, and says, "This is the perfect place."

I disagree. A perfect place would be somewhere public and open, not somewhere intimate. After sitting, I turn to him and say, "Thank you for the offer of instruction, but I don't know what you think to teach me. I completed my fae-blessed training with Camellia."

Ardwyn smiles as if amused. "I'm not talking about training for the fae side of being fae-blessed. Did you know some fae-blessed could also access Elven abilities? We're here to see how many of those you've picked up, if any." He reaches behind him for the hood of his robe. "Come out, Robin."

A small sparrow peeks out of the folds and jumps on his hand, chittering angrily.

"I know, I know. You hate for me to disturb your nap," Ardwyn says. "But I want you to meet someone. Say hello to Shayna."

A thrill goes through me as my name falls from his lips.

The bird chirps twice and tilts its head as if pondering me.

"Hi there," I say to Robin the sparrow, feeling entirely foolish.

The bird hops about excitedly.

“He likes you,” Ardwyn murmurs, his voice low and obviously pleased. “I want to try something.” He sits forward and holds out the hand the bird sits upon. “See if he’ll listen to you.”

“What, like, tell him to do something?” I stammer.

“Yes.”

“Okay,” I say, drawing the word out. “Land on my shoulder, Robin.” I try what he says, not expecting any results, but I am genuinely surprised when the sparrow obeys.

“Ohmygosh!” I breathe.

Ardwyn smiles another dazzling smile. “Magnificent.”

I get the feeling he’s speaking less of what I’ve just done and more about me personally. Shifting uncomfortably under his gaze, I turn to Robin instead. “You’re a cute little fella, aren’t you?”

Robin preens, flapping his wings.

“So, you can command beasts,” Ardwyn says. “Let’s try something else.” He gently grips my chin and turns my head back toward him. “Look into my eyes, and try to compel me. I want to see if you inherited powers of persuasion.”

I gulp. He hasn’t removed his fingers, and our knees are almost touching. Inhaling in an attempt to steady myself, I find it has the opposite effect. Because Ardwyn’s scent is heady. He smells like a forest after it rains. I find myself breathing deeper.

“Shayna?” Ardwyn asks innocently. He either hasn’t noticed my sniffing or is pretending he didn’t. I’m hoping it’s the former.

“Right. Okay.” I shake myself and concentrate. Putting what I hope is power into my words, I command, “Take your hand off me.”

Other than a slight twitch of his fingers, nothing happens. His lips turn up at the corners slightly, and he says, “That’s okay. Persuasion is something nobody masters on the first try,

not even the most skilled of us. *If* you do have it, it may take practice.”

Finally, Ardwyn removes his fingers from my chin, and I exhale a sigh of relief.

“At least we know you can command animals,” he continues, and my mind begins to wander.

How have I never known I could do this?

I guess it makes sense. The horses in Feristle are trained to follow voice commands, and I don’t have much experience with other animals. The only other animals I was around on a regular basis were the castle dogs and only when hunting. They knew voice commands, too. I think back on how receptive Buttercup, my horse here in Careny, was to anything I said, almost as if she understood me.

“Did you hear me, Shayna?” Ardwyn’s voice cuts into my mental rambling, and I jump.

“Sorry. What was that?” I offer him a sheepish grin.

“You have a lovely smile,” he compliments, causing me to blush. “I was just saying that tomorrow we should train in the stables.”

“Oh. Uh, okay.” Being so close to Ardwyn makes it hard to think straight. My fumbling words consistently embarrass me.

“Great!” he says, grinning. “Let’s meet there at four o’clock. Shall I walk you to your chambers?”

“Alright.” We stand, and he extends his arm once more. “Thanks, but I think I can walk without help.” I’m surprised by how rude that sounded, but Ardwyn merely chuckles.

“And here I heard you were prone to falls,” he says, one sculpted eyebrow raised. I swiftly turn to look at him, and I only realize he’s joking when he breaks into a smirk.

“Well, if I do start to stumble, only then do I give my permission to catch me. This preemptive coddling is entirely unnecessary.” I turn back toward the door.

“Feisty,” Ardwyn snickers behind my back. He drops me off at my door, where he leaves me and my guard. “See you tomorrow, Shaylynn.”

How easily he switches to my alias when company can overhear.

I enter my room, where I find a very worried-looking Dimitri. He jumps to his feet and quickly closes the distance between us.

“I was looking everywhere for you. Where were you?” My love takes my face in his hands, gazing into my eyes as if to find any sign of trouble there.

I can’t believe no one told him where I was. He must have been so afraid for me, especially with Mordred on the loose. I sigh.

Hoping he will take this well, I open my mouth to deliver the likely unwelcome news.

“I was with Ardwyn.” The words fall quickly from my lips, but they taste like ash. Dimitri opens his mouth to speak, but I hold up my hand. “The queen called me to her throne room, where she and Ardwyn sprung lessons on me. It turns out I have Elven abilities, too.”

Dimitri’s glower lessens but only somewhat. “Did he touch you?”

“How did you know that?” I ask, recalling how he gripped my chin.

The glower is back in full force. “I knew it. The way he looks at you, as if he wants to devour you, I figured it was only a matter of time before he tried touching you. Where did he touch you?”

Dimitri is acting frantically possessive. It’s kind of hot, but it’s also something I’m not used to. “Just my chin,” I answer, hesitant. “And he also wanted to walk arm in arm.”

“If it were any more, I’d have to restrain myself from violence. As it stands, I don’t want you anywhere near him,” my love growls.

“That’s going to be a bit difficult,” I protest. “I need to master these abilities if I want to defeat Barlow and save my sister. He and I are supposed to meet at the stables tomorrow.”

“Then I’m going with you,” Dimitri insists. “I’d like to see him try to touch you when I’m present.”

“I think I can handle myself, Dim,” I say softly, using my nickname for him. Giving him a reassuring smile, I grab his hand. “I don’t think I’ll be in any danger.”

“Doubtful.”

“I trust him.” I run my hand over Dimitri’s arm. “And you can trust me.”

“Your trust in him is misplaced. The man has been here all of two days and has already gotten you alone multiple times. Why can’t you see that he may have something else in mind? It’s not like anyone can deny your beauty.” His voice is pleading as he presses his forehead to mine.

“He’s gotten me alone, yes, but he hasn’t tried anything. Not really.” I close my eyes and sigh. “I’ll be careful, okay? You know that my heart is yours.”

“I know, love. But it’s not you I’m worried about. He comes in with his smooth words. It could be easy for you to fall for him. I’ve seen the way you try not to look at him, and I’m worried he may try to take advantage.”

“If it will make you feel better, I’ll keep our lessons in a public setting as much as I can. And I’ll do my best to make sure you’re there, too. My heart is not so easily swayed, Dim. I am, and have always been, yours.” I don’t know how else to convince him but to assure him of this.

Placing a soft kiss on Dimitri’s lips, I wrap my arms around his neck. He places his hands on my hips and deepens the kiss with a fervor he rarely shows, as if by kissing, he might claim me. I’m not sure what’s gotten into him, but I like this possessive side of him. Kissing him back with reckless abandon, I let him push me against the wall, where our breath mingles in the heat of our passion.

Placing one hand next to my head and the other at the small of my back, he nibbles on my lip. “Mine,” he breathes.

“Yes,” I sigh. “Always.”

Then he pulls away and runs the back of his hand down my cheek. “You’re beautiful. I don’t know what I’d do without you. It’s not that I don’t trust you, and I’m sorry I acted that way ... but have you seen the way he looks at you?”

Maybe I haven’t noticed it the way Dimitri has. Maybe I’ve been too busy avoiding looking at Ardwyn to see him gazing at me. Or maybe I’ve convinced myself otherwise. Either way, I don’t want Dimitri to feel like he has competition. So, I say, “Let us forget about him. Right now, there’s only us.”

A heat enters my love’s gaze, and I shiver, suddenly aware how alone we are in the room. I’ve never wanted to be closer to him than I do right now. But it’s impossible. Being with Dimitri in that way can only happen if Father will let us marry. Lifting my chin, I close myself off from my love, at least for the time being.

The small action seems to shake him out of the thought path he was clearly going down. “I should go,” he whispers, his lips so close to mine. “As much as I don’t want to.”

I nod, unable to speak.

With one last kiss on my lips, this one much more chaste, Dimitri walks to the door. Over his shoulder, he calls, “What time will I need to meet you at the stables?”

“Be there at four o’clock tomorrow,” I say at his back.

“I’ll see you then.” And at that, he walks through the door, leaving me desperately wishing we weren’t a princess and her combat trainer. Wishing we were anyone else. I’d even settle for a stable boy and a servant girl.

I lie in my bed and curse my status, my responsibilities, and my cowardice. For if I were a braver girl, I would have agreed to run away with him. But had we known Faerie had other ideas for me—like saving the entire realm and having

even less time with my love than I expected to after running away—I would have suggested somewhere else.

But then where would that leave my sister? Perhaps rather than the one doing the cursing, I am the one who is cursed. Will I have a happily ever after in the end, or am I only destined to help others find theirs? And if so, is it even worth it?

I need to snap out of this. Grumbling, I stand and move to the door. Opening it partway, I gruffly say to the guard, “I need to go for a walk.”

The guard, who I’ve seen around before but has not had the pleasure of guarding me until today, nods. “Lead the way, Shaylynn.”

So, we head outside, where the afternoon sun beats down on me like my worries have for the better part of an hour. I do not know where Dimitri went, but I need to clear my head of him, too. At least for the moment. Tilting my head back, I let the sun hit my face and sigh.

“Better?” the guard asks.

“Better.” And I hope it will get better still.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Nobody Asked You

I WALK THROUGH the courtyard for several minutes, but it is sweltering outside. Sweat beads on the back of my neck and runs down my forehead, threatening the pink cream I applied this morning. The heat does not do good things to my hair, either.

So, I head toward the door to the castle. I open it at the same time as someone else and nearly bump into them.

“I see you’re making this a habit,” comes the dry voice of Rose, my nemesis. She sneers at me. “But at least I found you.”

Oh great. She has the worst timing. Now she can kick me while I’m down.

“What do you want, Rose?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“You should be a little more grateful that I came to find you. There’s talk of Barlow’s spies in the castle. Wouldn’t want you to be ... unprotected,” she says, grinning maliciously.

“I know all about Mordred’s presence,” I say brusquely. “And I have guards with me at all times.”

“One guard against the likes of Mordred?” Rose laughs. “You can’t be serious. Barlow’s most trusted spy is more than capable of taking care of a single guard. And here you are, practically alone outside the castle. It’s foolish if you ask me.”

“A good thing nobody asked you, then.”

The gorgeous faerie’s eyes narrow dangerously at me. “Well, we’ll see about that. And I didn’t come to find you for nothing. It’s not like I enjoy your presence.”

“Clearly,” I interrupt, letting the sarcasm drip like sap. “Get to the point already.”

“The queen will be hosting a gala tomorrow night to gather support for her cause. She asked me to oversee getting you prepared.”

“Lovely. And that means ...?” My voice trails off as I wait for her response.

“That means dresses. A gala is something that requires the best. And since you always appear so drab, the queen thinks you need my help.”

“I’m sure that’s what she meant,” I say, still being sarcastic.

“Yes, I’m sure it is, too. But anyway, we need to get you fitted. Come with me.” She grabs my arm none too gently and drags me inside. “I have the castle seamstress waiting. If we’re late, I’ll be sure to tell her it’s your fault. Dressmaking takes time, you know, and the more you dawdle, the less time she will have to make yours.

“Normally, I’d be okay with you looking as dull and boring as usual, but as the queen has tasked me with this specifically, your appearance will reflect on me. So, you must try not to be as ... uninspiring.”

“As uninspiring as Ardwyn found you to be the other night?” I ask with false innocence.

Her jaw tightens as she bites out, “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that.”

“Pretending doesn’t make it any less true.” I hate that I’ve allowed myself to be sucked into her game, and I’m sure this will only cause more problems for me in the end. But for now, it’s great to see Rose so speechless.

Letting her drag me through the castle, we end up in a small room with several flowery room dividers and tables covered in various materials. A pudgy faerie with pins sticking out of her messy bun hurries over to us when we enter. “Good form,” she says, walking around me in a circle. “Thin waist, round hips. Not too tall but not too short, either. Yes, this will do nicely.”

She holds up a glittering gold material to my face, then she picks up a lacy teal material. “Hmm,” she says. Next, she holds up a velvety olive-green material. She shakes her head. “No, no, not that.”

Going through several more colors that seem not to suit her goal, she keeps returning to the gold and teal cloths.

“I’ve got it!” the faerie exclaims suddenly. “Yes, this will be perfect. Please remove your clothes,” she says to me. Turning to Rose, she tuts, “And you ... out!”

Nervous, I take off my scarlet tunic and tan breeches. I’ve only covered what skin was visible with the pink cream. But the faerie seamstress says nothing about my obvious difference in skin color beneath my garments. Instead, she says, “How do you feel about both?”

“Both?” I ask.

She shakes her head, as if I’ve just questioned something that should be entirely obvious. Then she holds up both the lacy teal cloth and the glittering gold cloth. “Both,” she repeats.

“Oh, um, that’s fine,” I say, not sure how they will go together. But I trust she’s the best, so I’ll leave it to her judgment.

Apparently dissatisfied with my level of involvement in the dressmaking, the faerie goes about measuring me. She cuts a strip of cloth from the gold material and several larger pieces from the lacy green material. Holding the green material up to me and wrapping it around my figure with a pin in her mouth, she nods. Then she sticks pins in parts of the green material.

An hour of silent poking and prodding later, she says, “Yes, that will do. I shall have it ready by tomorrow. You will be the talk of the evening. Now, put your clothes back on.”

I happily oblige before thanking her and leaving. My guard still stands outside the door. “Can you take me to my room ...?”

“The name’s Argus, my lady,” he replies. “And yes, I can take you back.”

“Thanks, Argus.” I wonder a moment at his name not being that of a tree or flower. Maybe that practice isn’t as common as I thought.

We walk in silence to my room, and I’m pleased to see Petal waiting inside. “Your Highness, you’ve returned!” She drops into a curtsy.

“You may rise, Petal,” I say, smiling at her. “And when we’re alone, you don’t need to curtsy before me.”

“Yes, Highness.” She stands up straight. “Is there anything you need?”

“I need many things, but I doubt they’re anything you can help with right now,” I mutter. Petal looks a little confused, so I continue. “No matter. What can you tell me about Mordred?”

“Mordred?” Petal squeaks, as if I’ve just uttered a curse. “Why do you want to know about him?”

“You haven’t heard?”

“Heard what, Highness?” If possible, it looks as if Petal wants to melt in a puddle on the floor.

“He’s here in the castle somewhere, and he wants to kidnap someone.”

“Heaven help us all!” Petal gasps. “Let’s both sit down. This is going to be quite a lot for you to take in, and it makes me faint just thinking about it.”

We sit.

“Where do I begin?” Petal murmurs.

I wait patiently for her to speak.

“So, Mordred ...” Petal whispers, as if speaking the name too loudly might draw him to us. “What do you know about him already?”

“I know he’s one of Barlow’s spies. That’s about it,” I admit, crossing my legs next to her on the bed.

“One of his spies? He’s quickly risen through the ranks. He hasn’t made it to second-in-command yet, but they say it’s

his goal. After he fell out of Barlow's favor two years ago, he's taken on risky missions to earn his way back in." Petal smooths the blanket on my bed. "If he's here in Castle Careny, it can only mean one thing."

"What's that?"

"Trouble." She gazes out the window, deep in thought. Several minutes pass before she says, "Mordred used to work for the queen, you know."

"Queen Ash?" I ask, my eyes widening in surprise.

"The very same. He was her personal scribe. She gave him everything, took him in as an orphaned child, and treated him like a son. When he was old enough to work, she gave him the esteemed position of scribe to the queen. How did he repay her? He betrayed her to Barlow soon after meeting him." The maidservant shakes her head in disgust. "He was ambitious. Didn't want to be a scribe. He wanted power."

That explains the strange reaction the queen had when I brought Mordred's name up. It was almost like she'd closed off. I imagine mentioning him without preamble put her on guard.

"How awful." I ponder what that kind of betrayal must feel like. I don't think anyone's been foolish enough to betray me. Father would have killed them.

"Yes. And the queen hasn't taken on any wards since."

The sun sinks below the horizon. I didn't realize how late it was getting. In the distance, a wolf howls.

"Shall I draw you a bath, Highness?" Petal asks. "I know obligations have not permitted you to sleep in lately. You must be tired."

"Thanks, Petal. That would be wonderful."

She grins and scurries to the bathing chamber, while I consider what I've just learned. This Mordred sounds like a double-crossing snake, only out for himself. And now he's back, ready to perform more wicked deeds right under the queen's nose.

After my bath, I lie down. It doesn't take long for me to fall asleep, and when I drift off, I dream.

"Hello, Shayna," Queen Siobhan says as I fall into another vision.

She and I stand on a beach with black sands and turquoise waters. The waves lap over the shore like a caress, and the air smells salty. We're barefoot, and the feel of the warm sand beneath my feet is exquisite. I hear the cry of seagulls, but I don't see any. The Elven queen's silver hair blows about her face in the mild breeze.

"Hello, Your Majesty," I greet her.

"How are things going? Have you met my ambassador?" she asks, sitting on the sand more gracefully than I have ever moved in my life. Then she gestures for me to sit, too.

"It's going well, I guess. Ardwyn is ..." A dozen words run through my mind: hot, aggravating, charming, unexpected. Finally, I settle on saying, "... interesting." And against my will, he has captured my interest.

"Well, that's one way to describe him," the elf says, throwing back her head and laughing. The sound is one of otherworldly joy. "Has he tested you yet?"

Tested me? He's tested my resolve, for sure. Tested my ability to say no. Tested my patience.

At my confusion, Queen Siobhan clarifies. "Has he tried to draw out any Elven abilities yet?"

"Oh." I suddenly feel daft. "Yes, he has. Turns out I can command animals. We're not sure if I have persuasion yet. Actually, we'll be meeting again soon to practice it."

"I knew there was something special about you." Queen Siobhan smiles, and the warmth of it surprises me. I blush. "The elves have nearly reached a decision about whether they will return to Faerie, but they're always slow to agree on things. We live a long time and make few hasty decisions. We must weigh every possibility.

“It could be some time before they make preparations for the move ... if that is what they decide. In the meantime, Ardwyn shall continue to act as my ambassador, ensuring a smooth transition.”

“I understand,” I say, while I curse to myself. I guess I’m stuck with him for now. This is so not what I need.

“I’ll let you rest now,” the elf queen says. “I just wanted to update you and see how things were progressing. It pleases me to hear that you possess some of our powers, and I look forward to hearing more.”

The dream fades, leaving me in a now dreamless sleep. For the first time in days, I wake up feeling like I got enough rest. As I throw off my covers and walk to the vanity, I grit my teeth.

Healing Faerie can’t come soon enough. I’m constantly riddled with anxiety and thrown into new, uncomfortable situations. I splash some water from the basin on top of the vanity on my face, and when Petal hears me stirring, she raps on the door.

“It’s me, Highness. May I come in?” she calls.

“Yes, Petal.”

She bustles in with her rough brown hair in a frizzy mess. “I’m glad you’re awake. It’s nearly noon. You’ve slept half the day away.” She opens the curtains to let more light in, and I blink as my eyes adjust. “I’m to help you pick some jewelry for the gala. I don’t know much about fancy things like this, but my grandmother was the former queen’s maidservant, so she taught me a little about formal occasions.”

It is now that I notice the carved box she holds in her hands. She sets it on the bed and opens it. Inside, there are necklaces, bracelets, circlets, and more. I walk closer. The jewelry in here alone must be worth a fortune.

“I’ve had a look at your dress and picked out the items that might go best with it. The queen’s seamstress did a phenomenal job. You’re going to look like a dream! But every

good dress must have accouterments.” She holds up some gold diamond teardrop earrings. “What do you think of these?”

“They’re lovely,” I say, not invested in the selections. Appearances don’t matter to me as much as other things. I’m not your typical princess.

Petal tuts and rifles through the necklaces. Then she gasps. “Oh! Yes, I think this is the one.” She holds out a gold chain with a diamond starburst dangling from the end. It’s dazzling. “Here, let’s try it on.”

The maidservant walks behind me and clasps the chain behind my neck. It falls just above my breasts, and the light catches it like a prism, sending rainbow shards of light in all directions when I move. It’s beautiful.

“This is perfect,” I agree, turning around and grinning at her. “My appreciations, Petal.”

“Don’t thank me, Highness. I’m only doing my job. Now, let’s get you ready. I hear that the Elven ambassador wanted to move your lesson up to one o’clock after the queen informed him of the gala. You’ll have just enough time for me to dress you, and then you’ll need to be on your way.”

Great.

“Would you tell Dimitri to meet me there, then?” I ask.

“Yes, Highness. I can do that.” Petal dresses me and ushers me out.

I hope she can find him in time. More alone time with Ardwyn will only frustrate me and agitate Dimitri.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Gala

I ARRIVE AT the stables before Ardwyn and Dimitri. My horse, Buttercup, nickers at me from her stall when I enter. “Hey, girl,” I coo at her, rubbing her soft muzzle. Her lips nibble at me in affection. “Aren’t you so pretty?”

“Why, thank you,” Ardwyn says from behind me, and I turn.

I’d like to wipe that smirk off his face, but I need to stay civil. So, I roll my eyes at him instead. “You’re early,” I observe. I came about fifteen minutes before we were supposed to meet, so I could get some calming horse pets in, but he arrived not long after I did.

“I find it’s good practice to be early to everything,” the elf says. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I guess so.” Except in this situation.

“Since we’re both here, shall we begin?” he suggests.

I can’t think of a good enough excuse not to, and protesting that I don’t want to be alone with him won’t work. So, I nod.

“Very well,” he says. “Let’s start with the horse. What’s her name?”

“This is Buttercup.”

“Okay. A pleasure to meet you, Buttercup,” he says to her. “We’re going to try something. Would that be alright with you?”

She nickers.

Then Ardwyn turns to me. “Even though we have authority over animals, we should always respect them. Unlock the gate to her stall. Don’t worry; she won’t bolt.” I oblige, and Ardwyn continues. “Now tell her to follow you.”

“After me, Buttercup.” I turn and walk away from the stall, pleased to hear her hooves clip-clopping behind me.

“Wonderful! Let’s try something a bit more difficult.” Ardwyn walks outside the stable, and Buttercup and I follow. Once outside, he says, “Make her rear. This could be helpful if you are attacked while mounted.”

“Up, girl,” I command. She whinnies and rears, kicking her front legs. I’m shocked that it worked.

“You’re doing great,” my instructor praises. “I have one more thing for you to try. See if you can bond with her.”

“Bond? What do you mean?” I ask. The way he said that made it sound significant.

“Some elves can form a connection with animals that goes beyond commands. It allows them to communicate back and forth. However, it only works with some animals, and the animal must choose you,” he explains. “See if you can touch her mind. If she accepts the bond, you will hear her thoughts.”

“Okay.” I take a deep breath and close my eyes. Then I rub my horse’s neck and search within. Maybe it’s like that extra layer of energy, and I need to stretch that muscle outward.

Without creating a bolt from my energy shield, I expand my focus. Soon, I see two different pinpricks of energy next to me, Ardwyn’s and Buttercup’s. The elf’s is stronger than the horse’s, but I don’t focus on him.

Reaching out to Buttercup’s energy with my senses, I prod and send a mental request for her to open up to me. After a couple of gentle nudges with my mind, I hear a mental nicker, and I see images of me talking to her on our various journeys together. Then I see images of apples.

“Yes, that’s me, girl. Are you telling me you want a treat?” I ask. She nickers and smacks her lips. “Okay. I’ll make sure I grab you some.”

“Did it work, then?” Ardwyn smiles, his dazzling white teeth flashing.

“I think it did.” I can’t stop my grin.

“You impress me, Shayna,” he says, and I preen. “Let’s get Buttercup back inside and practice persuasion.”

My horse willingly walks into her box stall at my command, and I feed her a handful of grain. Then I turn to the hot elf, suddenly reminded of how alone we are without Dimitri.

“Camellia told me you perform best under pressure,” Ardwyn states, “so I’d like to try something different today.” He takes off his cloak, revealing his lean muscles, and I tear my gaze away. “I’m going to attempt to restrain you, and I want you to compel me to release you. It works best with eye contact, but that’s unnecessary.”

Uh-oh. Does that mean he’s going to touch me again? Dimitri won’t like that.

The elf stalks toward me, lithe as a jungle cat and with the same predatory gleam in his eyes. I gulp, backing up, which only makes the gleam brighter. Then he pounces, just as a cat would, pinning me to the stable floor. I feel the weight of him pressed against me and smell his rainy-forest scent.

For a moment, I forget to struggle. His scent is too intoxicating. That’s a mistake because Dimitri chooses that moment to barge in, the stable door slamming open.

“What’s going on here?” he demands, his voice raised.

“What does it look like?” Ardwyn raises a brow, not moving to get up.

“It looks like you’re making a move on her!”

Ardwyn laughs, deep and low, and I shove him off, glaring at him. “Tell him the truth,” I growl.

“Fine,” the elf sighs. “I’m following Camellia’s advice. She said Shayna performs better when pushed to defend herself. I thought a physical attack might force her to use persuasion because Camellia’s attacks prompted her to use her fae-blessed abilities.” He dusts himself off.

“Find another way,” Dimitri grits out.

“This is the best and fastest method if you want her prepared to defend herself,” Ardwyn argues. “Unless you’d prefer she not have the training she needs?”

It’s a low blow. Even I can see that. On the one hand, I know how jealous Dimitri is when Ardwyn is involved, but on the other hand, he would do anything, sacrifice anything to protect me.

He sighs, gritting his teeth and clenching and unclenching his fists. “You’d better not try anything,” he says finally.

Ardwyn flashes a small smile but says nothing. Instead, he turns to me. “Shall we try again?”

I shift in discomfort before nodding. “Okay, but like Dimitri said, don’t try anything.”

We practice for almost an hour, the hot elf pinning me and me failing at compelling him until I eventually shove him off. The cycle repeats the entire time with no progress. By the time we finish for the day, a sheen of sweat covers me.

“Let’s return to the castle.” Ardwyn helps me up a final time, and we dust the dirt and hay off of our clothes. The hay stuck in my hair will require a bath.

When Ardwyn exits the stable, Dimitri grabs my arm and stops me from following. “I don’t like this,” he says. “He’s not only found another way to touch you but made it seem as if it’s the most logical choice. You’ll tell me if he tries anything, right?”

“Of course,” I assure him.

“Good. I can’t bear the thought of him stealing you away from me.” His expression darkens. “I know I can’t say you belong to me because of your father, but ... I’m saying it anyway. You’re *mine*, and I don’t like his hands on you.” His voice is a growl.

Then he kisses me like he owns me, and maybe I’m okay with being owned.

* * *

Dimitri kisses me like only his kiss will stake his claim on me, and I reciprocate. His teeth graze my lower lip, sending shivers through me. When he pulls back to rest his forehead against mine, I breathe, "I bet Father couldn't stand against you now that you're so powerful. Why don't we elope?"

"You're his only remaining daughter, at least as far as he knows. Do you think anything would stop him from tearing the world apart to find you ... and to kill me?" Dimitri sighs. "I need your father's respect and his permission. Otherwise, it cannot end well."

I pout.

"Don't do that," he murmurs. "You don't know how much that makes me want you." His gaze fixes on my lips.

"There you are!" Petal exclaims, running up to us while lifting her skirts to keep from trampling them.

I bite back a groan. "You have the worst timing."

"Actually, my timing is perfect. We need to prepare you for the gala." She grabs my hand. "Come. There's barely time for a bath, then the seamstress is waiting."

As she drags me toward the castle, she calls over her shoulder to Dimitri. "You'll see her soon. I promise."

After my bath, Petal drags me to the room where I first met the seamstress, keeping a swift pace.

"You don't want me sweaty again before we get there, do you, Petal?" I ask.

"No, Highness."

"Then perhaps we should slow down?" I suggest, teasing.

"Noted. Now, quit griping. There's little time, even for that," she sniffs.

When we arrive, the seamstress sets to work at once. "With the shape of the dress I've designed for you, we'll have to sew you in," she says. Then she pulls out the lacy teal material, but she must have sewed the shimmering gold strip onto it. "Come stand here and undress."

She places a strip of the teal fabric over my shoulder and pins the other side while she works. When it's finished, she moves me to the full-length mirror. I suck in a breath at the sight of me.

It's the single most beautiful dress I've ever seen, a floor-length, one-shoulder number that flares out like a fish's tail at the bottom. The gold fabric fits perfectly around my waist like an accent belt.

"Well?" the seamstress asks when I remain silent.

"I'm speechless." I twist and turn to look at it from other angles, noting how the gold catches the light. "It's wonderful."

"Here," Petal interjects, stepping forward with the starburst necklace. "I found some matching earrings, so I brought those instead of the teardrop ones. I hope that's okay."

"It's perfect, Petal."

She beams. "No one—except, perhaps, the queen—will outshine you tonight. You know Rose will be furious."

I smile at her but quickly turn back to the mirror. I don't look like a princess; a queen stares back at me.

"Now, let me do your hair," my maidservant says.

Gently pinning up one side of my blonde locks, she lets the other side hang down in a twist. If possible, it makes me look older than nineteen.

I think Petal knows I'm a human princess, but she doesn't know I'm the one from the prophecy. She knows I'm not fae because she's helped me apply the soft-pink cream to hide my fair skin, as she does now. Or maybe she just chooses not to comment on who I could be. A wise servant sees everything and says nothing.

The dye in my hair makes it the color of straw rather than its typically white-blonde color. I don't look much like myself, but my basic features are the same.

"You're ready." Petal takes my hand, her eyes shining. "Let's go."

We enter the grand hall, which I've never seen so full. Faeries, sprites, pixies, spriggans, and more mingle in groups, all of them dressed in extravagant attire. The servants have set up tables around the edges of the room, each covered with a white tablecloth and displaying a leafy centerpiece. The center of the room is open, and several of the attendees dance on the marble floor.

I lock eyes with Dimitri across the room, and it takes me back to the banquet in King William of Sylvidra's honor. But this time, he doesn't hang back; in long, purposeful strides, he crosses the distance between us, his eyes full of wonder and something ... deeper.

"You're gorgeous," he whispers, kissing my hand. "May I have this dance?"

"How could I say no?" I reply, giggling as he leads me onto the dance floor.

We've never danced together. There was never an opportunity in Feristle. But this feels right, his hands on my waist and mine around his neck.

Leaning in to whisper in my ear, he says, "No one compares to the ravishing beauty before me."

"Okay. Point me toward her, and I'll claw her eyes out," I joke.

Dimitri chuckles. "I'm trying to pay you a compliment."

"Do continue." I smirk.

"Truly, your radiance is more resplendent than the sun. I wither next to your splendor."

"Now who's teasing?" I grin.

"I wasn't kidding," Dimitri says, his voice serious.

I can't breathe. I can't even think. He literally took my breath away. Then he places his hand upon my cheek and leans in.

"May I cut in?" says a voice behind me, a voice I know too well.

“What are you doing here, elf?” Dimitri growls.

“I was invited.” Ardwyn’s voice is smooth but cool as he retorts.

“So, you’re inviting yourself into a private conversation?” Dimitri’s voice rises in volume with each syllable.

“You two didn’t look like you were talking.” The elf smirks. “Besides, I have something I’d like to discuss with Shayna ... alone.”

Dimitri looks at me as if to ask what I want. It’s doubtful Ardwyn will try anything here, and what if he has news of Serena?

I nod. “I will allow it but only to see what he has to say.”

My love looks hurt and angry, but I don’t think he’s angry at me. He glares at Ardwyn, proving me correct. I hope.

The elf shoots me another dazzling smile, and I try not to react. But I’m sure I do anyway.

“Splendid.” He holds out his hand. I hesitate, but I take it. Then he spins me around and rests his hand only slightly higher than Dimitri did, the other hand wrapping around one of mine.

“Now that I have you alone,” he whispers, “let’s talk.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It's Customary

“YOU KNOW, IT’S customary among the elves for a male who courts a female to dance with her publicly,” Ardwyn says, his tone nonchalant.

“What are you getting at?” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Nothing,” he says. “I am simply educating you on our customs.”

“Is that all you got me alone for?”

“Of course not. But we weren’t far enough from listening ears until now.” Ardwyn smiles conspiratorially, and my annoyance level rises.

“So, you just wanted Dimitri to hear that part.” I think he enjoys antagonizing my love.

“You think so little of me, darling.” Ardwyn winks at me. He actually *winks!*

“Don’t call me darling.” My glare is venomous; I hope he can feel it.

“As you wish, princess.” He says the “princess” like a prayer, which almost feels worse. But how can I argue? It *is* my title. When I remain quiet, the aggravating elf smirks.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?” I ask as he spins me around in a waltz. His movements are flawless.

“Ah, that.” He dips me. “Would you believe I simply craved your presence?”

“I would hope that wasn’t the case.”

“Well, there *is* something to discuss,” Ardwyn starts. “I’ve been informed that you’ll be needed outside the royal city to push back the blight infestation. I requested to accompany you and continue your training.”

“You did? Of course you did.” I sigh in defeat. “I don’t know what your game is, but I *will* figure it out.”

“You insult me, princess. Am I not earnest? Have I not helped you harness your powers?” Ardwyn leans in to whisper in my ear. “I can help with other things, as well.”

“Okay, what are you implying now?” I pull back, stopping in the middle of the dance floor. The other dancers artfully glide around us.

“You wish your father would approve of your relationship. I can persuade him,” he says, his voice low.

“How did you know that?” I ask in a breathless whisper.

“I have my ways.” The elf grins. “So?”

I ponder the idea for a moment. Can I live with the guilt of taking away Father’s free will? I doubt it. Father may be many things, but he doesn’t deserve to be a puppet.

“Thanks, but that won’t be necessary,” I say as he spins me again, resuming our dance. The music picks up in pace, and he expertly adjusts our steps to match the tempo.

“As you wish, princess,” he murmurs. “But somehow, I think you’ll change your mind.”

“Not likely.”

The elf only smirks at me, that infuriating little tilt of his lips.

“Stop that,” I say.

“What?” he asks, feigning innocence. It makes my blood boil.

“You know exactly what.” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Someone’s touchy,” he says as the song ends, and Dimitri walks back up.

“I think I’ll take her back now,” my love says, his voice commanding instead of civil.

Ardwyn bows his head at him and steps back, allowing Dimitri to slip me back into his arms. His arms, which feel so solid, although maybe not as solid as Ardwyn’s. I mentally

kick myself for thinking that, but it's hard not to notice when he just had them wrapped around me.

When Dimitri and I have returned to the center of the dance floor, he murmurs, "Now, where were we?" and leans in, brushing his lips against mine.

A squire chooses that exact moment to make an announcement. "Welcome," he shouts above the din of the crowd, "to Her Majesty Queen Ash's Gala of Souls!"

Dimitri curses. "We will continue this later," he growls, muttering about incessant interruptions.

The crowd quiets as the squire continues. "And now ... the queen of the fae!"

Queen Ash steps forward, looking imperious in her glittering silver gown, which nearly matches her silvery-blond hair. The sleek dress holds the light of a thousand stars, and she curled her hair in waves like the sea. She does outshine me, like Petal said, but she looks beautiful, regal, and every bit the queen she is. It almost makes me feel small in comparison. *Almost.*

"I am glad to see everyone," she says, her voice carrying over the crowd with ease. The silver, ruby-encrusted crown upon her head glints under the light of the chandeliers as she turns to meet my gaze before passing over me to others. "Friends and allies, I have asked you here this evening to discuss the growing threat of war."

Gasps and murmurs erupt through the crowd.

"So, it's true," I whisper to Dimitri, "what Queen Siobhan said."

The fae queen continues. "The Unseelie fae that fled after the First Great War have come out of hiding. Barlow leads them now, and they have declared war against the Seelie Court ... against us. Will we stand by and let them destroy everything that's good in this land?"

Many of the people gathered cry out in outrage. Others look full of trepidation. Some of the pixies fly about in panicked circles. But Queen Ash isn't done.

“I have not called this gala together as a simple social event,” she declares. “This is a call to action. When you return to your cities and villages, tell your people to prepare for war. Barlow will show no mercy, so let us show him none!”

After the crowd quiets, the fae queen finishes with a command I feel is too calm. “For now, enjoy the feast,” she says, and the guests disperse to the tables on the edges of the room, leaving me wondering if this kind of address is customary for the fae.

Servants flutter about, carrying trays of decadent fruits and vegetable arrangements, desserts, and drinks. I pass on the fae tea, but I help myself to a heaping serving of fruit and cakes. The food tastes delicious, but I’m too stressed to enjoy it. My thoughts are on Barlow and his declaration of war.

Dimitri and I were assigned seats at a table with Rose and Ardwyn. That has to be awkward for her, but she isn’t focused on him. She glares daggers at my gown, arms crossed over her chest. Petal was right; Rose is jealous.

Her own dress is a deep red, sleeveless, and hugs every curve. Her lime-green wings and red hair complement it better than one would think. She hasn’t touched any of her food and leans as far away from Ardwyn as she can. He ignores her, his attention focused on me, to her obvious dismay. Come to think of it, *that* could be the reason she’s looking at me like that.

Dimitri’s expression is much like hers as he glares at Ardwyn staring at me. There’s a lot of glaring at this table and not a lot of speaking. The tension is thick enough to cut. But at least Ardwyn isn’t saying anything to antagonize my love.

“Enjoying your meal?” the elf asks, looking at me like I’m the food, and Dimitri clenches his jaw.

I stand corrected.

“Yes,” I answer him simply, trying to ease the tension at the table, “the fruit is quite good.”

Am I the only one eating? Why aren’t the others at our table eating what’s on their plate?

Ardwyn's stare is intense as he watches me nibble the blueberries and strange yellow berries on my plate. The yellow berries have a burst of sweet yet spicy flavor unlike anything I've tasted.

"Have you tried the honey cake, elf?" Dimitri asks. "I've heard it's *to die for*."

"I'm not hungry," he replies. "At least, not for that." He only takes his gaze from me long enough to wink at Dimitri.

Rose simmers, and Dimitri clenches his jaw, gripping his fork so tightly I wonder if it will break. Suddenly, I don't feel so hungry. Halting my spoon, I look back and forth between the two men.

"Stop this," I scold.

"He started it," Dimitri says in haste, withering under my glare.

When Ardwyn smirks, I round on him. "That means you, too," I growl, stabbing my spoon in his direction.

The elf raises both hands in surrender. "Sorry," he says, looking anything but. "You can stay your weapon, little human."

I ignore his teasing. "If you two want to hash things out, you can do so when you're alone and *not* when we're at a gala full of hundreds of people." I put my spoon down, and the others have the sense to find their food terribly interesting. Dimitri digs into his honey cake, while Ardwyn, like me, tries the fruit. Rose nibbles on some celery.

She's been so quiet that I wonder if she's trying to be on her best behavior where Queen Ash can see. I'd like to test that theory.

Winking at Dimitri and mouthing for him to play along, I ask, "Rose, did you hear Ardwyn is giving me private lessons on persuasion?"

She wears the pained expression of someone who's swallowed an apple whole when she says, "I had heard that."

Her voice carries an abnormal amount of politeness, but an edge of steel creeps into her eyes.

I grin. “Yes. It’s going quite well.” I hazard a glance toward Ardwyn. “Wouldn’t you say so?”

“Yes,” he agrees. “If only you can keep me off of you.” The words are a jab at Dimitri, but they serve my purpose as well.

Rose flinches, then suspicion darkens her gaze. She knows I know about her rejection outside Ardwyn’s quarters. I smile, a cold, malicious smile. Perhaps it’s wrong of me to kick a girl when she’s down, but she needs to be reminded not to make my life difficult. Someone in her position has no business abusing her authority.

Rose’s eyes fill with hate, but she says nothing, opting instead to return to her celery. Ha! This confirms my theory that she doesn’t want the queen to know how vile she is underneath all of her sucking up.

We finish the rest of our plates in relative silence, but now I know Rose’s weakness. How do I use it? Will it only work when she and I are in the queen’s presence? Or can I exploit it in other ways? This will require careful planning.

Servants arrive to clear the tables of plates, bringing glasses of wine with them. They place a glass in front of everyone at the table as the squire calls for the attention of the guests. The liquid bubbles, rich and red, as I lift the glass to my lips.

“I wouldn’t drink that if I were you,” Ardwyn says, his voice dry.

My hand stills. “Why not?”

“Fae wine, at least at social gatherings, is enchanted. Drink that, and you’ll dance ’til your body gives out,” he murmurs, eyes flashing.

High, reedy music fills the air, and many bodies gyrate toward the center of the room, laughing and stomping their feet. Their empty glasses refill, though no servant poured more wine into them.

My jaw drops. “How did they do that?” I gesture to the newly filled glasses.

“As I’ve said,” Ardwyn intones, “it’s enchanted wine. I suggest you return to your room, little human. If you leave now, you should be far enough away not to hear before they play the pan flute. You *don’t* want to be present for that.”

“I’ve heard a pan flute before,” I scoff.

“But you’ve never heard the fae play a pan flute,” he argues. “It will bewitch you just as easily as the wine, little human. You should go.” His eyes flash, and I feel a sudden sense of urgency at his words.

Dimitri and I rise, leaving Rose looking strained next to Ardwyn. We walk as quickly as we can without running. When we reach my room, we realize no guard has followed us, so Dimitri stays with me. The faint sound of music rises from a couple floors below, and it’s haunting. It makes me want to tap my foot and weep all at once. Maybe Ardwyn was right.

“Don’t listen to it,” Dimitri says. “I can see you wiggling over there.”

“It’s not like I can shut off my ears,” I retort.

“Then we’ll just have to be louder,” he responds, grinning. At a near shout, he continues, “What was that back there with Rose?”

“She’s mad because Ardwyn rejected her and clearly shows interest in me,” I shout back. “But she won’t act against me when Queen Ash is around.” I thought I’d told him about the exchange between Rose and Ardwyn, but maybe I hadn’t.

Dimitri closes the door behind us. “I noticed that. She just let you taunt her without retaliating.”

I smile.

“What is that look?” He yells the question. “I’ve seen you get that look once before. It was when you wanted to play a prank on Meredith. What are you planning?” He narrows his eyes at me.

Meredith was the daughter of Father's friend. We practically grew up together. We were partners in crime for years until she and her father moved away two years ago. Some prospect in another land, or so he'd claimed.

She and I were polar opposites, but that's what made us such good friends. One day, she'd made me mad, so I decided to prank her. She was terrified of frogs, so I got up hours before dawn and went down to the pond in the middle of the forest beside the castle. Carrying only an empty spice jar and a satchel, I caught three frogs and placed them in the jar with the holes open for air.

Then, after carrying them up to her room and trying to keep them as quiet as possible, I placed them in her bed.

The sound of her shrieks brought the whole castle running. She got me back the next day, but it was worth it. Dimitri had tried to stop me, calling the prank immature. Back then, he and I didn't get along, either, and he couldn't have convinced me to abandon my pursuit. That was before I truly *saw* him. Saw his character and heart.

"Shayna?" Dimitri's soft voice pulls me out of my memories.

I notice the pan flute has ceased playing, replaced by a violin. We no longer need to drown out the music, so I respond in a normal voice, too. "Sorry. What did you ask again?"

"I said, what are you planning?"

My slow smile unnerves even me. "You won't like it."

* * *

Hyacinth may have made a mistake. She didn't react to some brutish inside joke the princess' father told. He saw her limping after practice with Birch, who had not failed so miserably at impersonating Dimitri as she had at pretending to be Shayna.

Her bewildered expression gave her away when the human king had asked if he should amputate, an amused smile on his face as he gestured at her sprained ankle. She didn't

understand what kind of barbaric practice he referred to nor why it was funny.

The king suspects her now. She must send word to Faerie. The last missive from home said Shayna's work there was too essential to spare her for keeping up appearances in the human realm. They'd initially planned for Shayna to return every few weeks, but that won't be happening.

King Frederick spent the hours since their encounter this morning in his war room. People have gone in and out, but no one has come to collect her yet. Maybe Hyacinth can fix this. She must.

Otherwise, the king could figure out she isn't his Shayna, and he could send troops to Faerie to retrieve her. She cannot fail. Faerie will die if she does.

She curses to herself in Old Fae. Queen Ash is going to kill her. If King Frederick doesn't kill her first.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Evalis Tree

DIMITRI SLEPT IN my room because no guard ever showed up to watch the door. How did they all get lost in the music? Does the pan flute affect them just as deeply as it did us?

Somehow, I ended up half on top of him, my ear on his chest. The rhythmic thudding of his heartbeat soothes me as his soft snoring fills the room. He smells like sandalwood and spices, warm and musky. The light spattering of hair on his chest tickles my nose, and I wrinkle it, fighting back a sneeze.

His hard muscles beneath me make me feel safe and small. Protected. We've never slept in the same room before. Sure, we camped together during our journey to the Northern Mountains, but that was different; we were never alone. But now, in my chambers, it's just him and me, and it makes my heart ache for the day when we don't have to hide. When things like this are as easy as breathing.

Dimitri stirs, taking in a deep breath and stretching. His eyes land on me. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." I beam up at him.

He blinks again, realizing where we are and the scandalous position we're in. Then he re-buttons the top few buttons on his dress tunic and sits up, putting distance between us. Not meeting my eyes, he says, "Your father can never know about this."

My heart sinks. I was elated to wake next to him, but is he ashamed to be with me? My throat burns, and tears fill my eyes. I turn my face away, so he can't see, and I say, "You should go."

Dimitri doesn't notice my turmoil or the shakiness in my voice. He continues avoiding my eyes. Instead, he nods and gets out of bed. Over his shoulder, he calls, "I'll see you at lunch."

I don't respond.

Dimitri opens the door and startles. Petal stands just outside, arm raised as if to knock. She smirks when she sees us in the same crumpled clothes from yesterday. Then she schools her face and says, "Oh, sorry. I came to collect Shayna."

Dimitri looks resigned as he sighs. Then he walks past Petal without a word. She gives him a look of confusion before raising an eyebrow at me.

"I don't want to talk about it, Petal. And you are not to tell a soul that he was here all night." I give her a stern glare in warning.

"Understood, Highness."

She curtsies, turning formal, and I regret how my words came out. There was no need to take my rejection out on her. Now I've gone and upset everyone this morning.

Her tone hesitant, my maidservant continues. "Pardon me, Highness, but Lord Ardwyn has requested your presence in the inner castle courtyard. I am to take you to him. Shall I help you change?" She gestures at my lacy teal gala dress, which is not fit for the type of training Ardwyn likely has in mind.

I will need her help this time. I had forgotten that the seamstress had sewn me into the garment. So, I nod, and she steps forward, singing softly as she walks around me. The stitches undo themselves at the sound of her song, and the dress loosens before falling to the floor.

"How did you do that?" I breathe, awed.

She smiles, the tone I took with her earlier forgotten. "It's simple plant magic. The thread was an ordinary, dyed hemp, and all faeries can manipulate plants and nature to a degree."

"That's amazing, Petal." I grin at her as she hands me a tunic and trousers. They accentuate my breasts and curves in ways I'm not used to. It seems improper, but many things about the fae are. Women in Feristle didn't wear breeches, but I did when horseback riding. Yet they never showed as much of my figure as these.

Petal, noting how I stare at the fit of my pants, says, “Women’s trousers. Aren’t they wonderful?”

“They’re something,” I mutter under my breath. I feel so exposed.

“Come, Highness.” Petal grabs my hand. “Lord Ardwyn is waiting.”

A guard outside my door falls in line behind us as she leads me through the corridors, and I slow when we near the courtyard within the castle. I instantly recognize the stone walls with open sky above. The pink-blossomed tree stands in the center with the same marble benches around it. It’s the same courtyard where I first overheard Mordred discussing a kidnapping, but instead of Barlow’s henchman, Ardwyn is there.

He sits on the nearest bench, conversing with Robin, his sparrow. His head cocks as the bird chirps at him, and he turns to grin at us. Well, at me. He hardly looks at Petal.

Standing, he approaches us, and Petal excuses herself. I barely hear her. My focus is on Ardwyn. He looks rugged today, the shadow of a beard on his chin and a wicked gleam in his eyes. Those eyes. They’re the palest green today, and did they just check me out? I think they did. His silver hair has a single small braid on the left side of his face, while the rest of it falls straight.

“Walk with me, Shayna,” he murmurs. Then, to my guard, he raises his voice with an air of authority. “You will not be needed. You may return in one hour.”

As soon as the guard exits the courtyard, Ardwyn grips my arm gently and leads me to the other side of the tree. He pulls me down beside him on a bench. “We’re going to have a nature lesson,” he announces.

“No persuasion today?” I ask. I was hoping to use the exercise to get over the events of this morning with Dimitri.

How could he have gone from cuddling to cold and distant so quickly? My heart hurts all over again at the memory.

“You know, when you say things like that, little human, it leads me to believe you like it when I touch you.” The elf smirks. He is so arrogant!

“Hardly,” I scoff. But is that a tremor in my voice? I hope to the healers’ God that he didn’t hear it.

“I don’t believe you,” he says, eyes flashing. “But that’s not why we’re here today. Rest assured, you will feel my hands on you again. Just not now.”

I grit my teeth because I know if I say anything, it won’t be civil.

“Do you know what this tree is?” Ardwyn continues in a light voice, as if he hasn’t both threatened and promised to touch me again. As if he wasn’t devouring me with his eyes as he did.

I must find something to do with my hands. Fidgeting under his gaze and not trusting myself to speak, I shake my head.

“I believe you have a magical tree in your castle in Feristle,” he says. “A golden one.”

My eyes snap to his. How does he know that?

“This is the Evalis Tree. It is just as magical, but it serves a different purpose. These blossoms never fade or fall, just as the sun never ceases to rise and set. This tree represents balance, and as long as it stands, there will be a balance between good and evil, between strong and weak, between living and dead.”

“What happens if the tree dies?” I ask.

“If something were to happen to the Evalis, then it would be too easy for the scales to tip. The blight has weakened those on the side of good, leaving Barlow and the Unseelie strong. If the Evalis fails, so does the Seelie Court.”

I flash back to overhearing Mordred in this very courtyard. How ironic that he chose this place for his clandestine meeting.

“Long live the Evalis,” Ardwyn whispers.

Indeed.

* * *

I take lunch in my room, having asked Petal to bring me a plate from the banquet hall. I've got too much on my mind to socialize, and do I really want to sit at a table with Dimitri right now? No. I need to process what happened.

For two years, I've accepted the need to keep our relationship a secret. I've hidden in the shadows, stolen kisses under the stars. These last couple months in Faerie have shown me one thing: that isn't enough.

Being able to hold him, to kiss him in the open ... it's been wonderful. But Dimitri's sudden departure has solidified for me that I can't go back to secrets in the shadows.

He's afraid, and I can understand that. There are two likelihoods: either Father could have him killed, or we could be on the run for the rest of our lives. But why can't he see that there's another possibility? One where Father sees him as worthy. One where Father recognizes Dimitri's power.

If we can only save Serena. I know that doing so would gain Father's favor, and I have hope that it's possible.

Why can't Dimitri have faith in us?

Then there's Ardwyn. I still can't figure him out. It seems he has only two goals: annoy Dimitri and seduce me.

At least Ardwyn wouldn't be afraid to be seen with me. The Elves don't fear humans; they could persuade any human to do whatever they wanted. Father wouldn't be able to stop him from taking me away if that was what he set his mind to.

But Ardwyn is the type women should hide their hearts from. The risky type. The dangerous, delicious, *unsafe* choice.

And I know so little about him.

Sighing, I push away my half-eaten meal and climb into bed, pulling the covers over my pale hair. The hair dye is fading again. It needs applied so often in this place. Something about the magic in the air quickly strips away any disguise.

I groan into my pillow.

“You alright in there, princess?” Argus, my current guard, calls from beyond the closed door.

“I’m fine,” comes my muffled reply. But am I? No. Not really.

* * *

It’s evening when I awake to a soft knock at my chamber door. I’d fallen asleep from the exhaustion of my jumbled emotions. Rising slowly from the comfort of my warm bed, I tread across the cold, wooden planks until I reach the entryway. It’s Dimitri. My heart both leaps and plummets as I step outside, closing the door behind me.

He wrings both hands before lifting one to the back of his neck. “Are you avoiding me, Shay?”

I am, but I’m not going to admit that to him. So, I opt for silence.

“Shay, talk to me.”

“I have nothing to say.” And I don’t. At least, nothing that won’t hurt us both.

“If this is about last night ... it shouldn’t have happened.”

And there it is. The sucker punch to my gut.

“I’m not afraid of my father,” I rage. “We could make it work. But you carry enough fear for both of us.”

“I—” he starts.

“No, you listen. There is nothing I want more than to be with you. But I won’t live under the shadow of King Frederick De Marco. I think we need some space, so you can figure out if I’m worth standing up to my father. To your king.”

Dimitri steps back, as if the words burned him. A look of devastation comes over his face. He opens his mouth, then he closes it. Hands falling to his sides, he takes a shuddering breath. “You know I would do anything for you, Shay,” he says in a rough whisper.

“So, do this,” I plead. “Choose me.”

“I have chosen you.”

“No. You haven’t.” A single tear trails down my cheek, and I wipe it away. “Excuse me. I need some air.” Without another word, I walk past him. I feel his stare on my back as I round the corner and descend the stairs.

Then, suddenly, I’m running. Barefoot and in a nightgown, I’m running. I don’t know where, but it doesn’t matter. I just need to get away. Tears streaking silently down my face, I run so fast that I lose Argus, who had followed me from my hallway.

The tears blur my vision as I run until my lungs ache. Then I run some more. I round another corner down another hall and run into a warm, solid form. Strong arms steady me, and I look up. And up.

“Everything okay?” Ardwyn asks, then he sees my face. “What’s happened?”

I wipe a traitorous tear from my cheek and sob. Ardwyn wraps his arms around me, and I bury my face in his chest. Stroking my hair, he shushes me as the quiet sobs wrack my body.

After many long minutes, when I have spent all my energy, I settle, and Ardwyn pulls back. “Are you hurt?” he asks.

I let out a broken chuckle. I am but not physically. So, I say, “No.”

“If you won’t talk about it, at least let me feed you. You weren’t at dinner. Nor lunch if we’re counting.”

He noticed my absence? Why?

Ardwyn leads me to the guest wing of the castle, where his room is. He can’t be taking me there, can he?

Oh, he is.

We enter his large chamber, and he directs me to sit on the green settee while he walks over to a stove I hadn’t noticed

before. Seeing me looking at it, he gives me a small smile and a shrug. “Perks of being an Elven ambassador,” he says, his tone nonchalant.

Lighting the stove, he pulls out some salted meat and a frying pan, drizzling oil into it and laying the meat on top.

Meat. When’s the last time I had it? Probably when Ardwyn smuggled some boar meat in a week or two ago. Whatever he’s cooking now smells amazing.

“Do you often cook for women in distress?” I joke, trying to make light of this embarrassing situation.

“This is hardly cooking,” he replies without looking at me. “Back home, we would have more than mutton, boar, and beef. There are wild gazelle and other beasts. The flavor is much more exotic and can add decadence to an average meal.”

“Gazelle, huh?”

“Gazelle. This is nothing compared to what I’d love to prepare for you.” He glances at me then, his gaze intense but brief as he returns to his sizzling pan of meat.

My stomach flutters.

I’m in *way* over my head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Secrets

ARDWYN FINISHES COOKING the meat and pulls some wrapped bread with cheese filling out of his cupboard. As I lament the fact that my room doesn't have a kitchenette, he places some of each on a plate, then he passes it to me.

"Eat," he says, his tone implying there will be no arguing with him. Not that I'd want to; the meat smells delicious.

I take a bite and moan. Ardwyn's eyes watch me intently, lingering on my mouth with every bite. "Like it?" he asks after a few moments, though I'm sure it's obvious I do.

Mouth full, I can only hum, "Mm-hm."

Ardwyn smiles like I just told him they're giving out free honey cakes in the kitchens. Or, at least, like Dimitri would smile if I'd said that.

Dimitri.

I've suddenly lost my appetite, so I push away my plate. I didn't eat much, but it was enough to stave off my hunger.

"Are you going to tell me what upset you?" Ardwyn prods, having settled in the armchair across from me. He steepled his fingers under his chin.

I swallow hard. How can I admit something like that to him? How could I tell anyone I slept alone with Dimitri last night? And if I tell him that my love and I had a disagreement about it, that opens the door for him to ask more prying questions. Or to use the fight as an opportunity to get closer to me.

"Did it have anything to do with that human boy?" He means Dimitri.

I nod.

"Do you need me to take care of him?" There's a threat of violence in his eyes that makes me shiver.

“No.” I laugh nervously. “It’s nothing that serious.”

“So, you two are going to make up?” he pries. Is he nosy, or does he ask because he has interest?

I can’t answer his question, but my silence is answer enough for him.

Ardwyn sips his fae tea. “Are you thirsty?”

“Not for that,” I answer quickly, wary of the fickle drink.

“It has an effect on you?” He looks genuinely surprised.

“It doesn’t for you?” I ask, mirroring his surprise with my own.

He frowns and sets his cup down on the side table. “It’s warming, but it doesn’t cause elves any emotional reaction like it does the fae. Frankly, I’m surprised it affects the fae-blessed at all, given their propensity for Elven abilities.”

“Huh,” I say, feeling less than eloquent.

“How about some wine instead?” Ardwyn offers. “I promise it’s not enchanted. I’d give you water, but I don’t have any here.”

Sharing wine with an unbelievably hot elf in his private quarters? That’s playing a dangerous game. Especially for someone who can’t hold their liquor. It wouldn’t end well.

“Thank you, but I should probably go.” I move to stand.

“Then let me escort you back to your room. It’s nearly midnight.” Ardwyn rises, too, striding toward the door and opening it for me.

Midnight? Have I been here that long? I know I awoke after dinner. It was dark when I rose from bed. But how hadn’t I noticed how late it had gotten?

“Okay,” I agree. There is still the looming threat of Mordred. For all I know, it could be me he’s after.

“Do you want to stop by the kitchen first for some water?” Ardwyn’s musical voice fills the air between us. When had he stepped so close?

I consider his suggestion for a moment. I am quite thirsty, but I don't want to be alone with him for any longer than necessary. Now is not the time for his attention. I think Dimitri and I just broke up, and I'm too vulnerable for this right now.

"No, thank you. I'll call for Petal to bring me some."

"Alright," he says, appearing unfazed by my refusal. Then he wraps his arm through mine and leads me to my room. Once at the door, he looks as if he might say something, but he only whispers, "Goodnight, little human," and kisses my forehead gently. I watch him leave, exhaling in relief that I didn't give in to temptation tonight.

The sound of his footsteps down the stairs recedes, and I sigh.

Argus, my guard for the night, must have given up looking for me because he stands down the hall, an expression of annoyance on his face. Giving him a sheepish look, I enter my chamber.

Castle Careny was built with a system of pulleys. Each private room has a chain that dangles from the ceiling, which threads through the castle and connects to the servants' quarters. Pull the chain, and it rings a bell in their quarters as it raises the other end of the chain.

The bell wakes the servant on call, who inspects the chains to see which room requires assistance. Then the servant on call will send the maidservant or manservant who was assigned to that person. It's simple but effective.

Mine is located just inside the entryway of my room. I pull the chain and wait. It only takes Petal a few minutes to come knock at my door, but as soon as she does, I answer and usher her in.

She yawns. "You needed me, Your Highness?"

"Sorry to wake you, Petal. I know it's late, but I missed dinner and didn't want Ardwyn to escort me to the kitchens. I would have gone for water myself, but I do not know the way." I say the words in a rush.

“Slow down. I feel like I’m missing something here.” She blinks, trying to clear the grogginess and the confusion from her eyes.

“I’ll explain, but first, can you get me some water, please?” My throat feels parched, especially after the salted meat and bread.

Petal nods. “Of course. But I want all the details.” She flashes me a conspiratorial grin and leaves, closing the door quietly behind her.

If Mother knew how intimate I was getting with my servants, she’d probably spontaneously combust. She would never approve of this sort of friendship. A quiet voice in my head says she doesn’t have to know, and I realize I’m getting more comfortable with secrets than I need to.

Speaking of secrets ... I run my hand over my face. Why is it so hard for Dimitri to choose me? Why is it easy for Ardwyn? Everything feels like it’s backwards. If he could be courageous enough to stand with me against Father instead of living with forbidden love, this wouldn’t be an issue.

Petal returns with a glass and a pitcher of water. “Okay, now spill,” she says impatiently.

“I pour my drinks carefully, Petal. I never spill on purpose. Royals are taught finesse.” I smirk at her, and she rolls her eyes. “Oh, fine.”

I tell her everything, starting with escaping the music at the gala, then Dimitri, then Ardwyn cooking for me, and I finish with him dropping me off at my door. Petal lets out a low whistle.

“Sounds like Dimitri is being cautious to me. It’s normal for a suitor to seek the approval of his lady’s parents. Not only that, but you’re asking him to commit treason. From what you’ve mentioned, your father could have his head. I would have felt the same way as him.

“It’s Ardwyn I’m more concerned about. It sounds like he’s interested in being more than your instructor. Who would you choose if there were no obstacles in your way?”

“As far as I’m concerned, there aren’t any,” I respond. “Dimitri is blowing things way out of proportion. Father would come around.”

“Can you be sure of that?” she asks softly.

“Well, no....”

“So, how can you expect Dimitri to ignore the risks? They’re all on him.”

Her logic is too reasonable. “Maybe this is more about me,” I admit finally. “*I’m* not okay with the secrecy anymore. It was fine at first because that was all we knew. But I can’t go back to that. I can’t live in fear now that I’ve tasted freedom.

“And perhaps Dimitri just isn’t there yet. But if he can’t have the courage to face adversity to be with me, maybe he’s not worthy of me.”

“And Ardwyn?” Petal prompts.

“I don’t know yet.”

* * *

I don’t have time to plan my prank today because I slept in. I was up late with Ardwyn and then Petal, and I barely had time to dress before I was summoned to the stables. The messenger only told me to pack some extra clothing.

I push open the door to my room and take purposeful strides toward the stables. Both Dimitri and Ardwyn are there when I arrive, as well as all twenty-four enforcers. Everyone has a pack on their back, attached to their saddle, or at their feet, and they all have fully tacked horses. Even Buttercup is saddled, and she trots over to me, whinnying.

“Hey, girl,” I murmur, stroking her forehead. She sends images of carrots to me, and I laugh. “I didn’t bring any carrots, but I’ve been keeping a sugar cube in my pocket just for you.” She nickers and nudges my leg, sniffing for the treat. “Hey! That tickles.”

Dimitri looks over at the two of us, curiosity written on his face, but he doesn’t approach. Ardwyn, however, has no such qualms. He walks over as I feed Buttercup the sugar cube,

Dimitri's glare burning into his back. Well, he could be over here to prevent any advances from Ardwyn if he would man up.

Ardwyn has the posture of a man with insurmountable confidence. There is no slouch to his shoulders and no hesitation in his gait. Each step is firm as he approaches me.

"Your bond has grown," he observes. "Look how she pranced right up to you."

"Hm," I say, examining my horse. "Maybe it has." Then I turn back to Ardwyn. "Why have we been called out here? Does it have to do with the war?"

"Yes, and no," he replies. "I believe it's time for you to go on the road and push back the blight. It will aid in the war, but it's not directly related."

"Ah," I say, feeling Dimitri's stare still upon us. When I turn to meet his eyes, my ... whatever he is ... glances away.

"The offer to take care of him stands, if you're interested." Ardwyn raises his brows. He must have seen it, too.

"Thanks, but that will not be necessary." I return my gaze to his, which is full of mirth and mischief.

"Pity."

I smack his arm.

"If you wanted to touch me, little human, all you had to do was say so. There's no need to hit me to gain my attention. It's already yours."

My cheeks flush at his words, but the pink cream may hide it. It has to. I don't need him knowing how much he affects me.

"Stop that!" I hiss.

"Stop what, little human?" he murmurs, voice low and breathy. "Would you prefer I ignore you? I'm afraid that would be too difficult. You are rather impossible to ignore."

I roll my eyes at him, and he flashes a grin, stepping close. My breath catches at the sight of his smile. If Dimitri's gaze is

still on us, what does he see? The space between Ardwyn and me is minuscule, our bodies so close our breath nearly mingles.

Suddenly, I need space. I take a step back and tie my pack to Buttercup's saddle, facing Sycamore, who calls for the group's attention.

"Listen up!" the enforcer general says. "We have observed a colony of blights near the Eastern Forest, siphoning the magic and endangering the creatures there. We cleared out one blight from that area with Shaylynn several weeks ago, but we now believe it was a scout. Because when it didn't return to its friends, they sent more.

"Now we have an infestation. We believe something drew them to the area, but we don't know what attracted them. Queen Ash has assigned us to discover the cause of their swarm, recover it, and eradicate the pests. Reports are unclear how many we're dealing with, but we believe there are about seven." After pausing for what seems like dramatic effect, Sycamore says, "Time is of the essence. Mount up and move out!"

A flurry of motion later and everyone is on their horses. It's then I notice Ardwyn's snow-white stallion. He's breathtaking and a sleek, lithe breed I've never seen before. If I thought the fae horses differed from the ones in the human realm, this stallion is a world away from them. His graceful steps remind me of the new horse event sweeping across Feristle, Sylvidra, and even Luelle. Dressage, I think it was? My, how high he raises his hooves with each step!

Ardwyn, catching me gawking, rides over. "His name is Windrunner. He's of Elven stock. Good, strong horses. He can run three days without stopping to rest."

"He's gorgeous," I coo from Buttercup's back. Windrunner preens, pawing the ground, and Ardwyn's sparrow chirps from the hood of his robe. "Yes, you're gorgeous, too, Robin!" I laugh at the little bird, who ruffles his feathers and settles back in the makeshift nest.

Sycamore and Juniper take the lead in the procession, and Ardwyn rides beside me somewhere in the middle, with Dimitri about five horses behind us. I can feel Dimitri's eyes on me, and my heart breaks even further. But I must strengthen my resolve. I will not give in.

Thankfully, the Eastern Forest isn't far. It's only a few hours' ride at this pace. But that's a few hours of awkward staring and Ardwyn's undivided attention.

"Tell me about your likes and dislikes," Ardwyn says next to me, not even steering his horse because Windrunner knows how to follow in line. But Buttercup can follow, too, which means I have no excuse not to look at him when he speaks.

"My likes and dislikes?" I repeat.

"Yes," he says. And when I don't continue, he asks, "Are you stalling?"

"Maybe," I admit. "You make me nervous." Did I just say that? I'd better elaborate, or he'll think I like him. "Because I don't get you, not because you charm me or anything."

"Uh-huh." He smirks.

Great. I've just made it worse. Now he's definitely going to think I like him.

"Well, I like meats and cheeses, as I'm sure you know. I don't like grapefruit," I start.

His eyes gleam with amusement. "You know I'm not talking about food. What are your hobbies? Your passions? Besides horses."

He noticed my love of horses? Huh. I guess that conclusion isn't hard to draw, but it unsettles me that he knows things about me without me telling him.

"I don't know," I say finally. The admission is honest, but it startles me. Do I really have no hobbies other than those involving horses? Even foxhunting was on horseback. "I guess I was never given the option for more back home. My life was only about duty and responsibility. I was always busy studying

politics, training in combat, learning etiquette, and the like. Other hobbies were ... strongly discouraged.”

A look of regret and something else crosses the elf’s face, but it’s gone as soon as it comes. He smiles his dazzling smile again as he says, “Well, we’ll just have to rectify that, won’t we?”

And so help me if butterflies don’t fill my stomach.

I’ve thought it before, but it flickers across my mind again that this is not going to end well.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Energy

WE'RE CLOSE TO the Eastern Forest now, and it looks like a gray wasteland. Barely any signs of plant or animal life remain in the nearly half of the forest the blight horde destroyed. Either the reports were incorrect or more of the creatures showed up in search of ... whatever it is they're looking for.

There are twelve of them now. They range in size, the smallest being the size of one of Feristle's catapults and the largest more than three hundred yards in diameter. That one can only be described as colossal.

How can the twenty-seven of us defeat these? Trepidation fills me. Even with Dimitri and I among the troops, we're screwed. It takes multiple enforcers to entrap one blight, and there are twelve of them here. Can one of their nets even hold the largest blight?

"You look anxious," Ardwyn says next to me, and I startle. How did I forget he was there?

"And you're not?" I counter.

"No. I know we have this under control. And besides, I've been tasked with causing a distraction," he replies.

I arch a brow.

"Just wait and see," he says, giving me that cocky, aggravating smirk.

I wait. And then it happens. Hundreds of woodland animals flock toward the group of blights. Those that can climb ascend the trees to get closer to the magical monsters, while those that can't remain on the ground and make as much noise as possible.

The trees beneath the horde bend and creak, probably a direct result of the faeries, who are in deep concentration as they stare at them. Nature magic.

The blights turn their focus to the ruckus below them, sending tendrils out.

“This is our cue,” Sycamore says to the enforcers. “Take them down swiftly.”

A dozen of the enforcers charge forward, while five of the others lift their instruments and play. Three of the blights break from their formation and fly toward us over the dessicated ground.

“Oh, snap!” Dimitri yelps behind me.

Tendrils of deathly smoke drift down toward us from the belly of the nearest blight. Then it sends chaotic, disjointed images over the gathered troop beneath it. I put my shield up, preventing it from getting in my head, but that doesn’t help the others. Several of the enforcers clutch their heads, as if they might explode.

Someone fires a net ... and misses.

“Shay, Dimitri, do something!” Sycamore shouts as a net finally hits one of the creatures. But not the closest one, which grows nearer with each painful second.

Dimitri’s hands take on their glow, and he fires at the blight now only thirty yards away, which turns to face him. Its attention fully on Dimitri, the blight charges, something akin to a roar erupting from its gray pit of a mouth.

Dimitri fires again but misses.

The blight gets closer.

Dimitri fires another bolt of light, and it lands! But it still isn’t enough to defeat the thing.

Frantic, I separate a piece of my layer of energy to fire as a bolt. Then I let it go, thinking nothing except I must save Dimitri. That whatever it takes, he must live!

It pierces the blight, and something *strange* happens. It’s like my bolt of energy absorbs the magic the blight has stolen. The blight shrieks and dissolves, which gains the attention of the rest of them.

When I return the bolt to myself, something even ...
stranger occurs. I absorb the magic the blight stole. All of it.

My body shudders, and for a moment, I feel I might faint. Slowly and on shaky legs, I steady myself. But something is different. I'm different.

"Shay?" Dimitri asks. He's finally speaking to me? "Shay, your eyes are glowing."

I tilt my head, barely comprehending what he said because I'm too captivated by the thrum of power beneath my skin.

"Shay, you need to move!" Dimitri bellows, but the meaning of his words doesn't register.

I feel reborn.

"I've got her!" Ardwyn shouts to Dimitri as he tackles me to the ground. That's when I notice the massive tendril of the largest blight, which has reached where I just stood. It snakes its way through the people, trying to reach me, and I hear the blight's one word: *threat*.

But something is different with me, and that's when I understand.

I *am* a threat. And I can end this.

With a guttural cry, I rise from the ground and lift eleven bolts from my shield simultaneously, one for each of the remaining blights. The tendrils pause but then rocket toward me at maddening speed.

Yet I'm faster, stronger, *better*. Every one of the blights falls to the ground in streams of dissolving power. Power I take back in to myself.

All I feel then is energy.

I am energy, and energy is me.

The sounds of dissonant voices drift around me as I walk through the forest. They repeat the same meaningless words: Shay. Princess.

Whatever they're saying isn't important. All that matters is the power. Blinding, unending power.

And it's mine.

A hand touches me, and I glance down at the warm fingers around my wrist.

"Geez, you're ice cold!" the voice attached to the hand says. "Look at me, little human."

Human? I am human, but I'm so much more. And I could never be *little*.

I meet the eyes of my ... who is he? I know he's an elf, but he seems familiar. Have we met before? And that name he called me ...

"There you are," he says. "You're overloaded. Can you release it?"

Release it? Why would I want to? I've never been more ... *me*. The indescribable power flows through my veins.

"She's unresponsive," the elf says to no one. At least, if there is anyone else, I can't see them past myself. Because I can see the energy crackling beneath my skin, waiting to be released.

Is that what he meant by releasing it? Should I practice on him?

"Oh no," the elf says. "I don't like that look. Whatever you're thinking, *don't*." His voice is barely a whisper, more of a plea.

I raise my hand.

So much power.

Tilting my head, I smile.

"She's going to blast you," a familiar male voice says behind the elf. I look up and meet his gaze. His long black ponytail blows in the breeze, some strands whipping into his eyes as their sea-green depths focus on me. "Crap! She's going to blast me."

Yes. Yes, I am.

The elf steps into my field of vision and catches my eye. He utters one word in a command: "Sleep!"

I sleep.

* * *

When I wake, it's to disembodied voices. Or maybe I'm the one that lacks a body. Why is it so dark? Where am I? What am I lying on? It's oddly soft. Is it ... a bed?

The events of the last few ... however long ... flash before my eyes. That's probably why it's dark; my eyes are closed. But I can't risk opening them now. I need to know what the voices are saying. So, I strain my ears.

"... can't let her do that again! It's way too dangerous," Dimitri's voice says. "She didn't even recognize us! She almost torched me and Ardwyn. Him, I understand, but me?"

"She's invaluable," Sycamore's voice replies.

"Invaluable or not, how do you think you'll control her?" Ardwyn asks, his tone casual.

"You seemed to have that handled," Sycamore answers curtly.

"So, your only suggestion to keep her power in check is Elven persuasion?" Ardwyn's dry tone is light, but there's an edge to it I can't place. "If you think she wouldn't object to that, you're mistaken. She'd run the first chance she got, and where would that leave your precious Faerie?"

I could kiss him. Well, not literally.

It's quiet for a moment, then Dimitri says something I can't make out. Sycamore growls an answer, and my door opens. I pretend that's what wakes me.

"Hey, you're up," Dimitri says as he walks in with Ardwyn. He puts on a smile, but his shoulders and the set of his jaw are tense. Ardwyn doesn't even fake a smile, but his eyes are warm as he regards me.

"You're not shining like the sun anymore. That's a good sign. How do you feel?" Dimitri continues.

“Exhausted but more like myself,” I answer honestly. The effects of the blights’ stolen power have faded.

“You gave us a scare,” he admits.

“I scared myself, too,” I manage with an awkward smile. I may not have been scared in the moment, but I am now. Will that happen again? How do I control it if it does?

And how can I be of any use against the blight when things like this happen? I’m a menace and a danger to everyone. It might be better if I ran away anyway.

“It looks like when the influx of power faded, the dessicated areas and creatures that the power belonged to were restored,” Ardwyn says. “So, the good news is that this kind of change isn’t permanent. Granted, with the amount of energy twelve blights gave you, it took nearly two days for it to fade.”

Two days? I’ve been out that long? No wonder my throat feels parched.

“So, Shay ...” Dimitri starts, “this changes things. They want to use you as a weapon, but we’re arguing against that. I’m concerned they may disregard your choice in the matter, or others may force the issue.”

“Can they do that? Force me to fight?” I ask.

“I won’t let them,” Dimitri says, eyes flashing.

“I think they’d be in more danger from *her* if they tried that,” Ardwyn says, his tone bland.

Dimitri glances at him, an exasperated look on his face. “Do you have a comment about everything?”

“Why? Does it bother you?” The elf smirks.

“Do you always answer a question with a question?”
Dimitri folds his arms.

“Would you be offended if I blamed you for bringing out that quality in me?” Ardwyn raises a brow.

“Enough!” I shout, throwing up my hands. “You’re both adults. Act like it!”

“Feisty,” Ardwyn murmurs, his voice washing over me like silk. “You’re quite the spitfire.”

I badly want to protest, but doing so would only fuel his very *false* beliefs. So, I opt for silence and gritted teeth. I have a feeling that giving Ardwyn any validation will only make him worse.

A flash of jealousy enters Dimitri’s eyes as he looks from me to Ardwyn. Jealousy, and is that hurt? He blinks rapidly then continues.

“Queen Ash has called a meeting with the fae elders to discuss ... your place in the war,” he says, handing me some much needed water.

“They’re meeting about me, but they haven’t invited my input?” I ask, fuming.

“They want to know if your powers affect only the blight this way or if you can take the powers of any magical being,” Ardwyn chimes in. “And I have a place in that chamber as the Elven ambassador to Queen Siobhan. I can bring you as a guest.” He turns to Dimitri. “I won’t be able to bring *you*.”

For a second, I think Dimitri might hit him. The rage on his face is palpable. I don’t like the distaste in Ardwyn’s tone either.

“I accept,” I say before a fight can break out. “When is the meeting?”

“In ten minutes,” Ardwyn says, smoothly transitioning from arguing with Dimitri to the topic at hand. “We have just enough time to get to the chamber before they close the doors. There should be refreshments there. I know you must be famished.”

“Let’s go, then.” My appetite has disappeared after this news, though. I move to get out of the bed, now recognizing this as the castle infirmary. I glance around at the many beds arranged around the circular room and notice I’m not the only one here. An enforcer, whose name I can’t recall, lies in a bed on the far side of the room.

“Is he okay?” I nod toward him.

“Physically, yes,” Ardwyn supplies. “Mentally? He keeps raving about some secret plot but says he can’t remember any details, only that he saw a vision. But there hasn’t been a seer in a century, and the gift is much more specific than that. Merely the foolish ramblings of one who’s seen too much.” The elf shrugs.

But fear stills me at his words, and I make a mental note to come back and question the man. He could have answers about Mordred and the conversation I overheard in that courtyard so long ago. I won’t pass up the opportunity for information.

“Shall we?” The elf offers his arm, and I nod but ignore it. He sighs.

Then we walk toward Castle Careny’s war room. Each step feels heavy as dread settles in my stomach. Will my future be decided here? Will they take what I want into account? Or will they try to force me, like Dimitri said?

We walk through the courtyard with the pink-blossomed tree on the way. Does it look sickly? As we pass, I watch a single petal fall onto one of the stone benches.

When we get to the white birch double doors of the war room, I steel myself for anything.

“You okay?” Ardwyn asks next to me, eyes full of concern.

I can’t bring myself to speak a lie, so I nod one instead. None of this is okay.

He opens the doors, and every eye in the chamber turns to us.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Seer

QUEEN ASH'S EYES narrow at the sight of Ardwyn, but they gleam with something akin to pride when they land on me. "I should have known you two would find a way to join the discussion," she says, sounding almost resigned. Then she motions toward two empty chairs at the long, rectangular table. "Take a seat."

"But, Your Majesty!" a spriggan near the middle of the row of seats exclaims, indignant.

"Ardwyn has a seat here, Luellen. You know as well as I that any of us may bring a guest if the occasion merits," she chides. "Now, where were we?"

Those at the table exchange glances before a faerie on the end opposite to Queen Ash hesitantly speaks. We take our seats near the queen as he says, "We were discussing the, uh"—he glances at me—"advantages someone like her could provide in the war." Licking his lips, he adds, "It's been more than a few centuries since a fae-blessed has also been a conduit."

"For the benefit of our guest, could you please explain what a conduit is?" the fae queen prompts gently.

The male fae glances at me nervously, not meeting my eyes, but I see that his are a vibrant shade of violet. He turns back to the queen and speaks the rest while facing her. "Yes, Your Majesty. A conduit is a being that can channel the power and strength of others, if only for a time. Many of them were limited in what sources they could channel from, but some could channel from any magical being. They are deadly in battle because they can weaken their opponents and render them powerless, while they gain more and more power."

"Appreciations, Pinewood," the queen says. "You may continue."

“Your Majesty, imagine what we could do if she was on the front lines!” the fae called Pinewood breathes, his purple eyes bright as his hands wave about excitedly.

“May I interject?” Ardwyn asks. The queen glares but inclines her head in permission. “Shaylynn was unable to differentiate between friend and foe when these abilities emerged. She would have destroyed us all if I hadn’t used persuasion on her to make her sleep. I am skeptical about this idea because she could attack us as easily as she could attack Barlow and his troops.”

I wince, but it’s true.

“You would let all that power go to waste?” Pinewood objects. “We could instruct her!”

“Can you teach her, though? Can you even get through to her in that state?” Ardwyn delivers his words softly, but they feel like a blow. Yet it’s undeniable how right he is.

“I hate to say it, but I’m inclined to agree with the Elven ambassador,” the queen interjects.

Well, that’s a first.

“We must teach her. If we cannot, then she is too dangerous to let live. We could start small,” another fae suggests.

“And how do you feel about that, Shaylynn?” the queen asks, turning her intense gaze on me.

I kind of agree with the last fae. Without instruction, I’m a danger. But I won’t agree to fight in this war yet. I agreed to save Faerie, not fight its battles. So, I say, “That may be a good idea. Let’s start there.”

Queen Ash nods in approval, a soft smile playing on her lips. “Then we’ll send for Jasmine. She’s our best magic user. If anyone can teach you, it’ll be her. She was also around the last time a conduit walked Faerie.” She turns back to the assembly. “Does anyone have anything else of note to discuss?”

No one speaks.

“Then the meeting is adjourned.”

Most of the gathered fae and magical creatures move to stand, their wooden chairs screeching as they scrape across the floor. The faerie with the violet eyes pauses at the door, as if he wants to say something more to the queen, but he exits without speaking.

Only the queen, Ardwyn, and I stay behind. Immeasurable silence fills the room, neither Ardwyn nor Queen Ash dropping their gaze from the other. It reminds me of those games children play where the first one to blink loses. And I’m in between them.

The tension is palpable as my gaze darts from the elf to the fae queen until, finally, Queen Ash nods. “You’ve done well, elf,” she says, sounding surprised. “But I must speak with this one alone.” She gestures to me.

Under his breath, Ardwyn whispers, “Remember what I said about her, little human.”

I nod. *Don’t trust Queen Ash.*

“I will be right outside the door,” he says loudly enough for her to hear as well. Then he turns to leave, and I face a woman I’m not sure I’m entirely safe with.

“Come closer, Shayna,” Queen Ash beckons.

I take a few short steps to the head of the table, where she sits on a chair that looks more like a throne. It’s elaborately carved, with polished wood and a red velvet cushion. Stopping in front of her, I say, “Your Majesty?”

“The elders are pushing for you to be our weapon, as you’ve heard. I do not believe it wise to stretch your limits. But despite you only agreeing to save Faerie, I think, with proper instruction, you could save its people, too. I’d like to make you an offer. Fight for the Seelie Court, and I will call in your father’s debt to me. Survive the war, and I’ll ensure he grants you the freedom to do as you choose.”

I’m stunned. Isn’t this exactly what I wanted? Freedom to choose for myself?

Ardwyn's words bounce around in my head, telling me not to trust her. So, against my heart and desires, I say, "Appreciations. I'll consider it."

"That's all I ask." Queen Ash smiles. "Your help could be the deciding factor in our war." Her tone softens as she adds, "I'm sorry we have thrown you into this. This is a fight you didn't start but I am hoping you will help finish."

This is what I've been dreaming of. A way to be with Dimitri. If he can get it together and realize I'm worth the risk. But I don't know if I can trust her offer. Not if I can't trust her.

"I'll send for Jasmine," the queen continues. "She lives on the outskirts of Rubellion, the nearest city. In the meantime, continue your training with the Elven ambassador." She rises. "I think I've had enough meetings to last a lifetime. You will know what I mean when you are a queen." Then she strides to the door and opens it to reveal Ardwyn in the hall, right where he said he would be.

With a curt nod, the fae queen steps past him, heading toward her study, and Ardwyn turns to me. "What did she want to talk about?" he asks.

"She made me an offer," I respond, giving no more information.

"You can't trust Queen Ash," he implores me.

"I know, but I'm trying to see where the catch is in her offer," I reply.

"There is always a catch," he reasons. After a few moments, he adds, "You need rest. Let me take you to your room."

I remain silent as we walk, realizing that I am quite tired. But when I get back to my chambers, I'm too restless to sit still. My mind keeps returning to the enforcer in the infirmary. I use the pulley system to call Petal.

A short time later, she lets herself in. "Your Highness?"

"Can you take me to the infirmary, Petal?"

“Are you unwell, Highness?” Her face is a mask of concern.

“No, no,” I say. “There’s just someone there I need to see.”

“Alright,” she says, drawing the word out, as if she doesn’t know whether she believes me. But she leads me down the halls anyway. “The entire castle is abuzz with gossip about what they found in the Eastern Forest.”

“They actually found what the blights were looking for?” I marvel.

“After the elf and Dimitri brought you back here, the enforcers stayed behind to search the area. I’m surprised no one’s told you.” She eyes me quizzically. “You really haven’t heard?”

“I’ve been unconscious,” I say dryly.

“Well, they found an ancient relic from centuries before the First Great War. The queen is still trying to ascertain what it does and why the blight horde wanted it, but she’s let no one near it.” We’ve reached the infirmary, and we stop in front of the solid oak doors. “Do you need me in there with you, Your Highness?”

“That won’t be necessary. But you can wait here. I may need you to show me the way back.” Turning from her, I push open the heavy doors and enter.

The scent of death assails my nostrils, and I glance around. A small faerie lies on a cot near the door, looking sickly and wheezing heavily. Further in, the enforcer I’m here for sits up in bed, writing in a notebook. I approach him cautiously, but he doesn’t look up.

“Hello,” I say, clearing my throat.

Finally, the enforcer raises his eyes to mine. “It’s you,” he says simply. “Are you alone?”

“My maidservant and the guard that followed us are just outside.”

“Good. You’re not safe. No one is, but you especially are in grave danger.” The enforcer continues writing as he speaks.

“Are you talking about ... the plot?” I prod him, hoping he’ll reveal what I came here to learn.

“You know. Of course, you do. He won’t stop until he has you. You are the key to defeating him, and he wants you gone or subdued before you grow powerful enough to stop him. That, or he’ll convert you. They are here, even now. The castle is full of his spies. You are not safe. Trust me, princess.” He sets down his notepad, and my eyes widen in shock at what’s scribbled on it.

Shayna De Marco. It’s nothing but my name over and over, line after line.

“You should flee this place before he comes for you,” the enforcer says, and I take a swift step back.

This is creepy, and I need to leave. Without another word, I back toward the door and rush out. Petal and my guard are still outside. At the look on my face, my maidservant opens her mouth to question me, but I shake my head.

“Take me to the stable,” I say with shaky breath. I need to see Buttercup.

We reach the stable in record time, and Petal doesn’t argue as I march right for Buttercup’s stall, taking some brushes with me. She nickers when she sees me and nudges me with her nose.

“Hey, girl.” I stroke her neck and begin brushing her, letting the calm of her presence wash over me.

Buttercup sends images of the last time she saw me through the bond. I looked otherworldly in my overloaded state. My skin glowed, and my hair raised up like static electricity. I feel her question through her thoughts.

“I’m okay,” I assure her.

Buttercup nuzzles me and goes back to eating hay. She relaxes as I brush her, and I do the same. “You’re such a good girl,” I say.

“I thought I’d find you here,” I hear a voice say from behind me. I turn to see Ardwyn approaching. “When no

guard stood outside your chamber, I knocked. When I got no response, this was the first place I checked.”

“Did you need something?” I ask, giving him the cold shoulder. I came here to be alone and think, and it seems like wherever I go, there’s no escaping this elf who makes all rational thought fly out the window.

“I came to see if you were alright. A lot has happened in the past few days. How are you coping?”

How am I supposed to freeze him out when he melts me so easily? This will not do. I sigh and put down the brush.

“It’s a lot. But I’m managing.” For whatever reason, I decide not to mention the added stress of my recent visit to the infirmary.

“I think we should double up on our lessons. You still haven’t mastered persuasion, and the fae queen wants you to learn about being a conduit. I believe our time to prepare you is dwindling.” Ardwyn shifts from foot to foot as he speaks.

How many lessons will I have to go through before they say I’m ready? I wonder. I never signed up for this, but if my life depends on Faerie’s survival, do I really have a choice? Yet it’s not just my life at stake; it’s Philip’s and Serena’s, too.

I groan.

“Oh, come now. I’m not that bad. In fact, I think you may actually like me,” Ardwyn says, mistaking my groan as a response to his words. He flashes his dazzling grin.

“You are growing on me, elf,” I admit. “Fine. For now, we can increase our lessons. But don’t expect me to always agree with you. I will never admit when your ideas make sense.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, little human.” He winks at me, and I blush. Curse him for being so flirtatious. Perhaps he is more of an imp than an elf. I must guard my heart around this one.

“So, what do you say, little human? Are you ready to start now?”

“Bring it, elf. I may be human, but I am so much more.”

“Yes, you are,” he agrees, glancing at my body in a way that suggests he appreciates its figure. “Exquisite.”

I meet his gaze. He’s going to pay for that. Then I put all my efforts into compelling him.

“On your knees,” I order.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Viper with the Barbed Tongue

“ON YOUR KNEES,” I order.

“On yours,” Ardwyn retorts.

Instantly, I drop to my knees, much to Buttercup’s displeasure. She lowers her muzzle to sniff me and, seeing I’m unharmed, goes back to her hay.

“Traitor,” I whisper at her. It sounds like she actually laughs. Looking up into Ardwyn’s gorgeous, grinning face, I scowl. “Well?”

“I rather like you in this position,” he says, smirking.

“Let me up,” I growl, my scowl deepening to a glare.

“If you insist. You may rise.”

I wince as I stand. The floor of the stall was hard, despite the bedding spread out upon it. I think I scraped my knee, too, judging by the slight wetness I feel on my leg. At least the stable hands clean the stalls regularly, and I don’t have to worry about manure on my clothes.

“You’re hurt,” Ardwyn exclaims, his brow furrowing. “Perhaps I spoke too quickly when I said, ‘On yours.’”

“I’m fine,” I growl. It’s mainly my pride that was hurt.

Ardwyn looks unconvinced, but he doesn’t argue. “Let’s try something a little less physical,” he says. “Follow me.”

I tell Buttercup I’ll be back soon and put away her brushes. She sends me images of carrots, and I laugh. “Yes, silly girl. I’ll bring some next time.”

As I trail behind Ardwyn to the castle walls, I notice how few guards are practicing today, and I wonder what they’re doing. We slow to a stop at a crumbled section of the wall.

“Pressure doesn’t seem to be working,” Ardwyn says. “Or perhaps I’m not scary enough for you to feel pressured. Either way, I’d like to try something different to see if we can unlock

your abilities. We need to find the well you draw on for your power.” He points at the wall. “I want you to make me scale the broken wall, but instead of drawing on fear or need, draw on desire.”

“Excuse me?” I eye him incredulously. “You are so full of yourself.”

A wry smile forms on his lips. “No, that’s you. Did you assume I meant desire for me?”

What else did he mean?

“Shay, I’m talking about will. Want. Make what you want to happen come to pass. If your desire is for me to scale the broken wall, then use that desire. Focus on it as you try to compel me. It’s how some of your fae-blessed abilities work, is it not?” The roguish grin on his face makes me wonder if he didn’t know exactly where my thoughts would go when he said “desire.”

What he suggested sounds easy enough, though. But hadn’t I tried this before? The more I thought about it, the more I realized my heart was never in it. I never believed it would work. Maybe I haven’t given my all because I doubted I could do it.

He said to focus on the desire. So, I picture what it would look like for it to work, and I stand tall. I imagine Ardwyn walking to the wall and pulling himself over. Then I meet his gaze and say, “*Climb.*”

Ardwyn’s eyes widen, and he takes a full step back. Then he grins. “I’d say that was a success.”

“Success?” I laugh. “You didn’t even do what I asked. All you did was back up.”

“It was never going to fully work on me,” he says. “I’m a master of persuasion. All elves are. But now you’re ready to try it on a non-elf.”

After all this time, he says I finally did it. How is there so much power in belief? I’ve been holding myself back for so long, it seems. Now I realize that self-doubt may have been the real enemy.

“So ... who should we test it on?” Ardwyn murmurs to himself.

A plan forms in my mind. I never pulled that prank on Rose yet, and she is long overdue to be put in her place. A mischievous smile creeps across my face. “I know just the one.”

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, we find Rose in the guard barracks, flirting with a guard at his post. She lets loose a girlish giggle at something he says and bats her eyelashes. “You’re so funny,” she squeals, hanging all over him. I’m nauseated just watching.

“Rose,” Ardwyn calls, gaining her attention. Then he compels her. “Come with us. Your assistance would be appreciated.”

Rose nods and says to the guard, “I’ll return to *you* soon, love.”

I think I throw up a little in my mouth.

Then she follows us to the crumbled section of wall.

“Alright, Shay, you’re up,” the elf says, and I step forward, hoping to the fae God that this works.

Rose eyes me with suspicion. Good. She shouldn’t trust me. I’d do a lot worse than what I have planned if it wouldn’t make me as wicked as her.

“Rose,” I start, forming a picture in my mind of what I want to happen, “fly to the top of the wall, and come back down.”

Her eyes grow round as her body obeys, and fear shows in her expression. She flaps her lime-green wings until she’s in the air, her red hair blowing in the breeze the movement created. Once she does as I ask, she must realize the power I now hold over her because she trembles.

“Rose, now I want you to find the queen and tell her how wretched you’ve been to the people in the castle. I also want you to tell her how you’ve treated me, her honored guest.”

The faerie's eyes bulge in fear and outrage, her face red and mottled, but she can't say no. So, despite her wishes, she heads toward the castle, throwing me a look so full of hate that I know there will be backlash for this. I doubt she'll be protected in the fallout, so I choose not to be concerned.

"Not only feisty but as wise and deadly as a viper. Shall I call you my viper, little human?" Ardwyn waggles his brows.

"I'd rather you not call me your anything," I reply.

"Your barbed tongue wounds me, Your Highness," Ardwyn says, clutching his heart.

"I think you'll live. Sadly." I grin at him. Crap. Am I actually starting to enjoy our banter?

"Sadly?" he scoffs. "Admit it. You'd be put out if I died."

"I admit ..." I pause for a dramatic effect. "... nothing."

"Little human," he starts. Something passes over his face, and I think he might say more, but I am disappointed. He merely shakes himself and flashes his signature smile at me. "You must be hungry."

Well, that was an obvious attempt to distract me from whatever he was going to say....

* * *

Jasmine arrived within three days, and while I expected more boring training and failure, she takes a different approach. "Since the effects of a conduit are only temporary, I'd like to try this out on live subjects," she begins by saying. "Now, I'm not an expert on conduits, but I'm the closest thing to one."

"What does that mean?" I ask the tall, beautiful, raven-haired faerie before me. She wears a simple burgundy tunic and tan breeches, and her hair falls in loose waves, framing her high cheekbones.

Her face falls as she decides how to respond. "My beloved was a conduit."

I don't miss that she uses the past tense. "I'm sorry."

“It was an eon ago,” she replies, brushing it off. Then she abruptly changes the topic. “But as I was saying, I think live subjects would be ideal. So, I’ve asked the queen to designate some.”

“Okay.” I’m nervous after the fiasco in the Eastern Forest, but if I can master this, maybe I’ll have a fighting chance against Barlow.

“Great,” she says, clapping her hands. “I’ll have them brought in.”

She rises from the floor of the indoor arena we gathered in, brushing off her breeches. The room is large but not nearly as immense as the stadiums in Feristle. Father loves sports, and he often hosts competitions for his knights to prove their worth. They do everything from jousting to sword fighting to obstacle courses at times. This arena is tiny in comparison. I doubt there would be enough room for even half of what Father’s arena can hold.

Jasmine strides to the sliding door, which must be at least four yards long on each side. Opening it with care, she motions to a guard on the other side, and I hear her say, “Bring in the queen’s guests.” She places heavy emphasis on the word “guests,” so much that I wonder what kind of guests could be considered low enough to use in an experiment like this.

Six guards usher in three chained faeries. The first holds his head high, his hair the color of ash and a haughty, unbothered gleam in his golden eyes. He carries himself not like a prisoner but like a king.

The second is his polar opposite, a small, mousy female with plain brown hair and matching wings. She walks hunched over and makes eye contact with no one. The faerie woman has a pronounced limp, like someone who broke their leg and didn’t receive proper care afterwards.

But the third prisoner is only a child. He has stark blue eyes and pale blond hair that looks like it hasn’t been cut in months. His eyes hold a wisdom way beyond his years, and as his piercing gaze falls upon me, I see no fear, only determination.

Jasmine looks them over, unimpressed. “Is this them?” The foremost guard nods. “The queen didn’t give me much to work with,” she mutters. Then, louder, she says, “They’ll do for now.”

My instructor motions for me to step forward. “I’ve been assured,” she says, “that each of these prisoners was arrested for abusing their immense power. Try to take it from them.”

The two adult prisoners appear outraged at the command, but the boy gazes at me with interest as I approach. I mentally feel for that layer of energy and tug a portion away, splitting it into three sections. Then I launch them at the chained faeries.

I’ve discovered I can make the energy solid or permeable. When it’s solid, it causes damage upon impact, but when permeable, it can be used in other ways without injuring those I use it on. So, I go for the less painful route, especially with the child. I don’t know what he’s done to deserve his chains, but I can’t bring myself to hurt a kid.

The bolts hit their mark, and I feel it: the draining. I feel each of their unique abilities as they flow into me. The haughty fae has the power to uproot trees, his nature magic being that strong. No doubt, he’s used it to wreak havoc.

The mousy fae woman has the power to kill and sap the life out of plants, tapping into their magic in the process. I wouldn’t have expected that from her, given her demeanor.

But the boy ... His power is the most surprising. He can control the weather, call storms, wield lightning, and stop rain. I wonder what devastation he must have caused to wind up here.

I sense the moment they realize their power is gone. Though the binding collar around their necks prevents them from using their abilities, I know they feel their absence like a missing organ. Like they aren’t fully functioning.

The two adults’ expressions range from shock and fear to rage, but the boy is different. A slow smile spreads across his face, and his eyes twinkle with ... Is that mirth?

“Now try and use them,” Jasmine orders, but I can’t take my eyes off the boy. He tilts his head in what looks like permission, as if to say, “Let’s see what you can do.”

The power thrums through me, all-encompassing, and I struggle to maintain my sense of self. If I go back to that place, where I forget who I am and what my purpose is, I’ll be lost. And Ardwyn isn’t here to save me right now. I draw a shaky breath, closing my eyes and concentrating.

Then I envision rain.

At first, nothing happens. Seconds pass with me holding my breath to see if this will work. Finally, it does. A drop of precipitation lands on my arm, then another splatters on my face. I gaze up at the clouds forming under the high, domed ceiling.

“Could you do that before?” Jasmine asks, open-mouthed. Unable to speak, I shake my head. Thunder rolls overhead, and she eyes the dirt floor. “Can you make it stop? I don’t think Queen Ash would be pleased if we turned her arena into a giant pot of mud soup.”

I picture the clouds dissipating, in awe when they obey. “Okay, that was cool,” I admit.

The haughty prisoner speaks, his voice oddly carrying a nasal quality. “Is this permanent?”

No one answers him. Instead, the guards lead the chained fae out, leaving Jasmine and me alone. The haughty fae has less of a confident air about him, his shoulders not thrown back as far and his head not as high. The door closes.

“So,” Jasmine begins, “I’d say you’re ready. You didn’t even need me.” She grins. “I love an easy job.”

I don’t say it, but I’m not so sure I am ready. It took everything in me not to forget myself, and that was with the powers of only three fae. There’s no telling what would happen if I were forced to use these conduit abilities on a battlefield.

“Right, then. I’ll inform the queen.” Jasmine straightens her burgundy tunic and runs her fingers through her wild,

raven tresses.

I say nothing, but a pit of dread pools in my stomach. I hope against hope that I'm ready for what's to come. It's frightening to think of what could happen if I'm not.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Let Me Sing You to Sleep

SOMEONE'S VOICE WAKES me from a deep sleep, and I groggily raise my head. Bleary-eyed, I throw back my covers, shivering at the chill from the open window. Hadn't I closed that last night? And why can't *anyone* let me sleep in?

"Shay?" Dimitri's small voice calls again through my door.

Oh, great. What is he doing here?

My heart twinges with the grief of his absence. And his presence. My emotions are a tangle of confusion as I rise to let him in. I wear a simple yet finely threaded nightgown, and the floor is cold under my bare feet. I can feel the chill of the wood planks beneath the ornate rug. Why didn't I shut the window first?

The door creaks as it opens, and I wince at the sound, a massive headache throbbing behind my temples. Did the door creak before? I can't remember.

The instant the door opens, I smell something sour and rotten. Dimitri stands at the opening, a warm smile on his face, but something about the smile feels off. And why is he smiling at me like that anyway? It's the kind of smile you give to a lover, not to the woman who ended things with you.

"Shay, there you are!" he says, much too jovially. "We're late."

My brow furrows. "Late ..."

"For the engagement party, silly. I sent word to your father that I intended to marry you. Don't you remember?" Dimitri smiles and absently brushes a strand of hair out of his face. "Your parents and brother are downstairs. I believe Queen Ash is entertaining them in the banquet hall, but they grow impatient to see you. After they arrived this afternoon, they've spoken of nothing but you. Are you ready to see them?"

“I don’t understand. They’ve agreed to let us marry?”

“You truly don’t remember? Last week, after you defeated Barlow, I told your father we were going to wed. Just as we planned, I detailed why I was worthy. The king agreed. We’re set to marry in three weeks.”

I try to recall, but none of it sounds familiar.

“You’re sure you’re feeling alright? Does your head still hurt?” Dimitri asks, concern etching lines into his face. “The healer said that bump didn’t cause any lasting damage....”

I raise my hand to my throbbing temple, where I now feel a rather large, painful lump. I suck in a breath through gritted teeth as I wince. “Ow.”

“Shay?”

“I ...” Could I have forgotten that much? I faced Barlow? We won?

“If we don’t show ourselves soon, your parents will undoubtedly come looking for you. Are you feeling up to seeing them?” Dimitri rubs the back of his neck as if uncertain. Is he afraid I’ll reject him again?

“I ... guess so,” I manage, allowing him to take me by the hand. Why is his hand so cold? Then I remember that I left the window open. But wait.... He never came into the room.

The castle and corridors look much the same as I recall. Elegant tapestries line the stone walls, and lit torches dot the hallways. But something is different, and I can’t figure out what.

We take the same familiar turns until we arrive at the great hall, but we stop at the doors. Dimitri places his cool arm around my waist. “We go in together.”

Then he pushes the doors open.

A sea of faces greets me, each breaking into an ecstatic grin at our arrival. There’s Queen Ash at the high table, her eyes twinkling. I see Mother, Father, and Philip at the table to the left of her. There’s Duke Umbridge and Lady Muriel with

their three children. The Barnaby twins, Andrew and Solomon, chase a ball around while their parents try to corral them.

The only one unhappy to see me is Rose, but that's nothing unusual. She glares at me from a far table, arms crossed over her chest.

On the edges of the room stand dozens of long tables, each piled high with divers foods and beverages. I even see a table of only meats, most likely for all the humans present.

"Are you hungry?" my love asks, bringing my knuckles to his cool lips. Something akin to hunger of a different sort flashes in his eyes, and for a moment, I can't tell what color they are.

"Famished, actually," I admit. The food looks mouthwatering. I almost can't tear my gaze away. It smells better than the grandest feast I could ever imagine, and I've attended plenty.

"After you, my lady. Everyone's been waiting for your arrival. You get the first plate." Dimitri sweeps his arm toward the table of meats. Of course, he knows that's the first thing I want to try.

We approach the long, low table. Like the others, a crimson tablecloth covers it. It has swirls and curving patterns in a vibrant gold that catches the light of the flickering chandeliers. The golden pattern dances wherever the light touches it.

Upon the table are platters and platters of meat, some I recognize and some I don't. There's roast boar, bear meatloaf, mutton, steamed fish with lemon, and there are even some fried beef patties with melted cheese, enclosed in buns. I've never seen such a thing.

"What are those?" I ask, pointing at the patties.

"Imported delicacy. I believe they're called cheeseburgers." Dimitri holds up a plate. "Try one?"

I lean in and sniff, letting out a groan at the same time as my stomach. Then I pick up a cheeseburger. At least the food is a normal temperature.

Something gives me pause, though. The fae never allowed meat in their hall, even when I was a guest. Why do it for these humans, whom they don't esteem as highly as they do the princess of the prophecy of the firstborn and secondborn? The only time they allowed it was when Ardwyn hunted the boar for me. Speaking of which... Where is he?

I scan the crowd but see no sign of the elf.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?" Dimitri prods. "I thought you were hungry." He walks to the roast boar and slices off a piece. "This might be more to your liking. It's seasoned with your favorite spices."

I set the cheeseburger down and back away from the meat.

Something isn't right. Gah! My head hurts.

"Shayna?" Dimitri reaches for me, and I recoil. Hurt flashes in his amber depths. Weren't his eyes green?

No, no, no, I think, shaking my head back and forth.

"Shayna," Dimitri repeats, his voice taking on a musical quality. "Shayna, snap out of this."

I jolt awake, gasping for breath. The soft, very warm bed beneath me creaks from the sudden movement. Eyes wide, I scan my bedroom, noting the closed window before my eyes settle on the elf kneeling in front of me.

"There she is. I thought we were going to lose you," Ardwyn breathes, rising from his kneeling position in front of my bed. I suppress a hysterical giggle. Finally, I have him on his knees, and I didn't have to use persuasion. No scraped knees were involved either.

"I was just having a nightmare," I protest.

"No. You weren't." He glances away, then he faces me again. "You were held captive by a biloduk. I sensed it when it probed my consciousness."

"A what?"

"A biloduk. Nasty creatures. They can weave deceptive illusions to ensnare their prey and cause them to enter an

endless sleep. They just probe the mind of anyone they wish to project, so they have access to their memories and how they act. Then they lure their victims into a false sense of calm by using their projected loved ones to get them to eat the food of the Otherworld. Consumption of any food from the Otherworld that's been touched by a biloduk will result in the endless sleep.

“It doesn't work on elves, nor can a biloduk project one of us because elves have power over the mind. But I sensed it the moment its mind touched mine, and I followed its trail to your room.

“Unfortunately, the fae-blessed are especially vulnerable due to their human nature. I think I have something that can protect you, though.” Ardwyn pulls a necklace out of his pocket. It has a long gold chain with an engraved diamond-shaped pendant dangling from it. “Here. Wear this.”

I sweep my hair aside and allow him to clasp it behind my neck. His warm fingers brush my skin, a contrast to the biloduk's chilled fingers as it impersonated Dimitri. A shiver dances down my spine at his touch, or is it because of the pendant?

“You saved me.” The words come out soft and low, but I know his elf hearing picked them up. An overwhelming surge of gratitude courses through me.

“I would say it's nothing, but it wouldn't have been if you'd been lost to us. However, I am very glad you're safe.” Ardwyn bows low. “I will let you rest. That charm will keep you safe, so you are in no danger if you return to sleep. It is not yet three in the morning, and there is a lot planned for tomorrow, so you should attempt it. Goodnight, little human.”

How can I sleep after the biloduk attack? I can't even bear the thought of being alone.

“Wait,” I call out. Ardwyn pauses halfway to the door. “Will you stay with me? At least until I fall asleep.”

“I'm not sure that's wise at this hour, little human. People will talk.”

“Please,” I whisper, my voice so pleading and pitiful that Ardwyn sighs.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” I pout.

“Alright, fine. But if scandalous whispers spread, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Ardwyn sits on the edge of my bed, his weight jostling me.

I lift my chin. “I’m a princess. People have been whispering about me since before I was born.”

“Very well. Now, close your eyes, little human. Let me sing you to sleep.”

I obey, and soon Ardwyn’s musical voice fills the air, sounding ethereal. In a tongue I’ve never heard, he sings what could be a lamentation or an upbeat tune alike. It lulls me until my eyelids droop, and images of an Elven oasis fill my head. Ardwyn sings. I sleep.

When I wake, the sun is bright, and Ardwyn is gone. A midmorning dew clings to the grass under my balcony, and birdsong fills the air. The unease from last night has lifted, leaving me in a pronounced state of calm.

Ardwyn was right. There is much to do today. There will be a festival this evening, and I’ve never been to a fae festival. From what I hear, it’s similar to the human festivals, but there’s magic involved. Nobody will tell me more, so I’m excited to see what that means.

It is forbidden for humans to see the festival preparations, but Dimitri and I are allowed to attend once it’s set up. There must be some huge fae secret surrounding their celebrations because not even Ardwyn knows. Either that or he wouldn’t tell me.

My head still hurts like it did in the biloduk’s illusion, so first on my list for today is seeing a healer. Castle Careny’s primary healer is doing who knows what in preparation for the events of this evening, so I’ll be seeing her assistant.

Exhaustion is my constant companion this morning. Having endured the attack last night and having woken up several times after it, you could say my sleep was less than restful. I find solace in the fact that there's no business or training to attend to today, only the celebrations.

At least the fae told me what we're celebrating. As Petal dressed me this morning, I was able to pry some information out of her. The festival is held each year in honor of the spring rain that yields a bountiful harvest and in honor of the changing of the seasons.

Petal dressed me in a long, flowing dress that I know will swirl in the breeze. It's a light green with bright yellow flowers on the skirt. The flowers trail up toward the bodice and stop just under it. Petal piled my hair high on top of my head and stuck it with dozens of pins. Then she put a crown of daisies on top. I look like a faerie princess, and I told her as much.

Now my maidservant paints my already-pink face even further as I try to keep utterly still. She lines my eyes with kohl and adds blush to my cheeks and rouge to my lips. "You look radiant," she hums when she finishes with the lip color. Then she holds a hand mirror to my face.

"This is wonderful, Petal. Your talent far exceeds one of your station. It rivals that of the makeup artists back home." I smile appreciatively, and she blushes.

"You are too kind, Your Highness. Now, you mustn't tarry. Get you to the healer, and try not to mess up all the work I just did!"

"Yes, Petal." I oblige, standing and being careful not to wrinkle my dress.

Then I open my door. Argus falls in step behind me as I climb the stairs and head to the tower of the healers. I know my way around most of the castle by now, so I don't need him to lead me. The only areas I don't know well are the queen's wing, the basement floor, and a few other places.

“So, Argus,” I begin, glancing behind me at the guard, “what do you do on your off time? Surely, you relax a bit when you’re not guarding me.” I flash him a playful smirk.

“I train,” Argus says stiffly.

“How...” I want to say dull, but I don’t want to offend him. So, I settle on: “...practical.”

The guard doesn’t react in the slightest, and I sigh. I’ve had little luck getting to know him. Argus is all business. I suspect that even when not working, he’s thinking about work. All my attempts at conversation have been treated as what they are: a distraction. Still, I admire his dedication to the job.

We arrive at the healers’ rooms, and though I secretly wonder if this headache is a magical affliction brought on by the biloduk, I know the healers can handle both physical and magical maladies alike.

Slowly, I push open the door.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Those Who Serve Him

THE HEALERS' CHAMBERS are next to the infirmary, which gives them easy access to the sick. I enter through that area to get to their chambers. It's empty, which is good because there's only one healer on duty today. Then I knock on the adjoining door.

"Come in!" Peony, the healer's assistant, calls. Argus waits outside, while I enter.

Peony has her arms full of bandages, gauze, and antiseptic. I rush over to her. "Here, let me help you," I say, grabbing some out of her arms.

"Oh, appreciations. I'm just restocking while business is slow." She gestures with her head to the open cabinet, where half the shelves are now full of supplies.

"No problem at all," I reply. "You got anything in there for a headache?"

"I do, actually. Let me set these down. While I'm searching for it, why don't you hop on this table?" Peony walks to the medicine cabinet and deposits the load in her arms. Then she rummages through the haphazard shelves.

"So, Peony," I begin, "do you serve the fae God, too?" I've had questions about their religion since I met the healer in Ledgewood.

"Mm-hm," she hums. "Most healers do."

"Does he have a name?" I ask.

"He has many names. He is the one who heals and who gives us the ability to heal. Our God is the one who saves us from sure destruction. He is the one who teaches us how to love, who teaches us kindness, selflessness, and sacrifice. He is the creator of all that was and is and of all that shall be. But only those who serve him may speak his name." Finding what she was searching for in the cabinets, she approaches me.

“And does he . . . talk to you?” I have never met a god, nor has one spoken to me before. If there ever were any gods in the human realm, they have long since abandoned us.

“Of course.” She gives me a bewildered look. “How else would we learn from him?”

“Learn from him? What does he teach you?” I’m more than curious now.

“Why, how to live a life of purity and love,” she says, eyeing me like she doesn’t understand how I don’t know this. I guess, if I’m supposed to actually be fae, and not merely pretending to be fae, I should know their religion. But she already thinks I must live under a rock, so there’s no harm in asking further questions.

“A healer I met somewhere mentioned chastity,” I say. “Does that mean you can’t marry?”

“Oh, no!” She laughs. “We can marry, but most of us choose not to in order that we might devote ourselves entirely to God.”

“That makes sense.” I don’t say that I think it must be lonely, but she reads it on my face.

“Serving him is not a burden, you know,” she says gently. “He gives us so much, and he speaks with us daily. He tells us things no one else knows and never lets us enter a situation without the knowledge we need. A compassionate God, he provides and meets every need. We are never alone.”

I ponder her words. Perhaps I can see how that might be appealing. “I appreciate you sharing,” I say after a while. Tilting my head back as she presses her fingers to my temple, I go silent.

“Mm-hm,” she hums again. Her eyes narrow as she examines me. “You said you have a headache? Are you sure you didn’t come in contact with a mind wanderer? There are claw marks in your mind.”

“I may have, uh, encountered a biloduk last night.” I wince at the pressure she applies to my head.

She nods as if in confirmation. “That’s what I thought. It’s an easy fix, but it won’t be pleasant.”

Walking over to a shelf on the wall, Peony pulls a bottle of bright-orange liquid down and brings it to me. “This is a special concoction to restore the mind. No wonder you didn’t know anything about God. It probably took your memories, too.”

I’ll let her believe that. It’s better than allowing her incredulity to grow into suspicion. Suspicion leads to questions, and questions can be dangerous things when you’re hiding something.

“Sip this slowly,” the assistant orders. “If you guzzle it, it won’t have time to work. The healing will be painful; it must stretch your mind to mend the tears.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I do as she commands, and a searing pain rips through me, worsening the headache. It goes from a dull throbbing to a sharp, stabbing pain. “Ah!” My groan is practically a scream.

Soon enough, the pain recedes, and my blurry vision becomes clear once more. I hadn’t realized my vision was affected until it wasn’t anymore. Sitting up straighter, I roll my shoulders.

“Better?” Peony asks, a knowing smile curving her lips. She doesn’t appear to notice the strand of soft pink hair that falls into her brown eyes.

“Much. My appreciations, Peony.” Then I hop down from the table. “Shall I see you at the festival?”

“Someone must remain here in case anyone is injured,” she says in answer.

“Then good day. May the sun shine upon you.”

Exiting the healers’ chambers and walking through the infirmary, I meet Argus in the hall. “You must be so bored, standing still all day,” I remark. I can’t imagine having his job. It would drive me crazy to have so little excitement. If I didn’t die from boredom, it would be from banging my head against the wall.

“My work is rewarding enough, princess,” he replies, saying no more.

I change the topic. “Shall we go to the gardens? We must find something to do before this mysterious festival.” I arch a brow. He, too, refused to speak about what it involves.

“As you wish, princess.” Argus sighs, clearly annoyed. Oh, well. With nothing to do today, I must find other ways to entertain myself, and I’m too dressed up for the stables.

The guard leads me outside, through the outer courtyard, and into the royal gardens. Hedge sculptures dot the landscape, and stone fountains in many shapes are interspersed between the flower patches. To my left, pink roses and fae thistle form a spiral pattern. To my right, daisies and milkweed grow together.

The fae don’t believe weeds are a nuisance to a garden. They respect all plant life and allow the weeds to grow rather than uprooting them. You won’t find weeds in the royal gardens of Feristle, that’s for sure. Humans don’t revere plants as highly as the fae do, but the fae have an affinity for nature, while the humans don’t. It is rumored that when a plant dies, the nearby faeries hear its screams. Granted, I’m not sure how true that is.

I stop at a fountain shaped like a spriggan dumping a bucket of water on a troublesome pixie. Gazing into the clear depths, I listen for sounds of the festival preparations happening nearby. All I can hear is the bubbling water, birdsong, and the plants rustling in the wind.

“Enjoying yourself, little human?” Ardwyn’s voice says from behind me.

I turn and see the elf approaching the fountain. He wears a long green hooded robe, with his long silver hair hanging down loose past his shoulders. His lips turn up in a smirk. “Are you going to answer me?” he asks. “Or has the royal garden rendered you speechless?”

“Are you going to ask me that same question every time you see me?” I put my hand on my hip and arch a brow.

“Only if you insist.” His smirk becomes a grin.

This man—elf—is so *aggravating*! I scowl. When he winks, it only infuriates me further. “What are you doing here, Ardwyn?” I turn back to the fountain, too annoyed to look at him.

Then comes the sound of soft footsteps on the path, and he appears next to me. “How did your conduit training go?”

I notice he doesn’t answer my question. Fine. If he wants to be evasive, let him. “Well enough,” I answer. Two can play at that game.

“Does that mean you were successful?” The elf rests his hands on the fountain and leans over it, peering at the crystal water.

How can I evade his question? What is there to say other than the truth? I let out a huff of air before settling on: “It appears that way.” I don’t mention that we only tested on three subjects, nor do I offer up my worries that, on a larger scale, results may vary.

Ardwyn’s eyes narrow, as if he understands there’s a lot I’m not saying. Then he turns back to the fountain. “Did you know pixies make their home in vast gardens? Castle Careny would be a perfect place for them.”

“I’ve never seen any here.” I glance at the diverse colors and patterns growing all around, a stunning display that should surely attract the creatures. Pixies love color, especially from natural sources.

“Do you know why that is?”

I shake my head. “No. But I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“As the realm of Faerie diminishes, many pixies have chosen to retreat to the wild places, where magic still runs free. Magic in this area is taxing because there are so many fairies in one place, drawing upon the land.

“In the wild, unpopulated places, the magic is stronger. Has Queen Ash mentioned the toll the slow death of Faerie has had on this area?”

“She has not,” I admit.

“I thought not.” Ardwyn turns to look at me. “The fae queen serves only herself. Remember that, little human.” His stare is intense, and I find myself suddenly unsure of what role Queen Ash plays in all this.

In the distance, a fanfare plays a jaunty tune. The dips and lulls of the instruments instantly improve my mood. I feel lighter, merrier, and I turn toward the square below the castle.

“Is that what I think it is?” It’s hard to keep the excitement from my voice.

“The festival has begun. Shall I escort you?” Ardwyn holds out his arm.

“I suppose that would be acceptable. But don’t get used to such things,” I tell him.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, princess.”

We walk arm in arm through the castle gates and onto the road that leads to the city. Dozens of people flow from the castle, too, and more from the houses and apartments on the city streets. They all make their way toward the city square, where an enormous tree comes into view.

“That wasn’t there before,” I remark.

“No, it wasn’t.”

The tree is at least twenty yards tall, with ivy and flowers winding up its trunk. From its branches hang fire sprites in glass jars, angrily thumping against the glass. Their fiery hair dances about in a frenzy, their emotions being so high.

At the base of the tree, faeries line up to deposit flowers of varying colors and species. As each flower is laid down, the faeries sing over it until it grows into the ivy, then the ivy flows farther up the tree to make room for more flowers at its bare base. When the tree runs out of room to accommodate the ivy, it grows several inches taller.

“If I ask what’s happening, are you allowed to tell me?” I don’t look away from the massive tree as I speak.

“It is not my secret to share,” Ardwyn says, sounding somewhat apologetic at least. “To them, it is sacred. I was permitted the knowledge an age ago, but I was sworn to secrecy. As you likely shall be if they deign to tell you.”

“Of course. I should have known. Well, shall we go down there?” Without waiting for his answer, I start the descent into the square. All the roads are hilly because of the city’s design. The further toward the castle you go—the castle being at the center of the city—the higher the land and buildings. That means we must descend to the city square. It’s near the lowest quarter, so the squat buildings are dwarfed next to the massive tree.

The smell of honey cakes, fruit, and other desserts wafts up to us the closer we get. It makes my mouth water. Have I eaten since breakfast? I can’t recall.

Wandering toward the delicious smell, I stop at a stall. “How much for a fruit tart?” I eye the blueberry-covered tart with cream cheese spread.

The faerie woman tending the stall laughs. “That’s rich,” she says in a thick Faerie accent. “Don’t insult me. We donate all our goods for the festival. Haven’t you ever been to one before?” She gives me a suspicious, incredulous look.

Then Ardwyn steps in. “One tart, miss,” he says, his one brusque.

The woman turns her ire on him. “Haven’t you got any manners, elf? You out-of-town folk are all the same.” Huffing, she passes me a tart and glares at us until we leave.

Despite the encounter, it tastes amazing. But sadly, it’s gone too soon. I’m licking my fingers when Queen Ash calls for the people’s attention, and the square quiets.

“Much appreciations for coming again to the celebration of the spring rain, harvest, and another season’s ending. And for your contributions to the Spring Tree. I know magic is dwindling, but you have done well in sacrificing a little of yours once more, that we might keep our land fertile and thriving as long as we can.”

That answers my question about what's happening at the tree.

“Now,” the fae queen continues, “is the perfect time to announce a recent discovery. Twelve blights recently invaded the Eastern Forest. We recovered what they were looking for.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Until My Dying Breath

QUEEN ASH SMILES at the gathered fae and magical creatures, her posture relaxed but regal. “Barlow has long been searching for a way to harness the power of the High Queens of old. He sent a blight horde into the Eastern Forest after this.” She holds up a golden scepter with a stone made of turquoise in its center. The rod is less than a yard in length and engraved with whorls and swirls that look ancient in nature.

“This,” she says, “is the relic of the first High Queen, passed down to each successor for generations. It has been lost to us since the First Great War, but no longer.”

The people murmur as a ripple of shock and disbelief passes through the crowd. Most of them seem to know what this relic is, but I can’t recall any stories of it from fable, legend, myth, or anywhere. Queen Ash smiles triumphantly at the crowd and waits for them to quiet.

“This scepter will change the war,” she continues. “The High Queens of old used it to bolster their troops, to create impenetrable barriers, and to harness the raw elements of the world. With this relic, we can turn the tide.”

Shouts and cheers erupt from the fae and Seelie creatures in the crowd. Some of the more animalistic fae’s cheers sound closer to beast than fae. I turn to Ardwyn, whose jaw is clenched.

“What does this mean?” I ask him.

“Queen Ash just became a little more dangerous.” There’s a tightening around his eyes that wasn’t there before.

* * *

After the speech, Queen Ash calls the crowd to the Spring Tree, where every fae and Seelie creature lifts up their voice in song. The lament is beautiful. I’m only fluent enough in Faerie to recognize some words, the rest being in Old Fae, but I think

it's a song of mourning and rebirth, of the past giving way to something new.

When the last note is sung, a hush falls over everyone. It's like they're waiting for something. I'm not foolish enough to speak, though I'm dying to know what we're waiting for.

Then a strange groaning fills the air. I glance around, but everyone continues to stare, unblinking, at the Spring Tree. So, I stare, as well.

The tree groans again, crackling and shrinking in on itself. It shrinks and shrinks until it's just a sprout, then the ground seems to absorb it up, as if it had never been there in the first place.

Where the tree stood, only a single flower from the ivy remains. The crowd cheers, but I'm left confused. *What just happened?*

"Now let the magic you have imbued reinvigorate our land. And less importantly, let the feasting begin!" the queen shouts.

"I must take my leave and speak with someone, little human," Ardwyn says while everyone else converges on the feast table. "Will you be okay on your own?"

I nod, knowing Argus is nearby. The man rarely takes a day off. Ardwyn disappears into the crowd, and I survey the scene.

Fae and spriggans dance in circles, and servants pass plates of food around. My eyes widen when I recognize Rose among the servants. I don't rejoice at how far she's fallen, even if there is a level of justice to it. She went from a lady of the court and the fae queen's chief adviser to a serving girl, but it was her own actions that put her there. I just spurred things along.

A sliver of guilt makes me wince. Rose bullied me, yes, but did she deserve to lose everything? Perhaps I could have given her the option to change her ways or come clean in lieu of forcing her to confess her wrongdoings to Queen Ash. Instead, I took away her choice.

As I watch the redheaded fae with the lime-green wings, I feel regret for what I've done, and I realize just how dangerous this gift—this curse—of persuasion truly is. Rose makes no eye contact with anyone, her head hangs low, and her wings dangle limply at her sides. A servant's collar wraps around her delicate neck, and I feel overwhelming pity for the woman I once called enemy.

Overhead, a vast expanse of dark clouds gather. They seem to writhe and undulate. There must be clouds for at least a mile. I glance around, but no one else looks up from the festivities. Am I the only one seeing this?

The clouds approach as if blown by a forceful gust of wind. I've never seen any that move that fast. And are those ... *faces* in the clouds?

Oh no. I know what those are. They're not clouds.

"Blights!" someone screams.

Then everyone screams as mass panic ensues. Several of the smaller creatures are trampled as everyone rushes to flee the approaching army of blights. Bodies jostle me in the crowd, then someone grabs my hand.

It's Dimitri.

"You need to run!" he shouts. I'm surprised I can even hear him over all the terrified screaming.

Then he's pulling me, guiding me through the mass of bodies. Argus falls in step beside us, easily keeping pace. But then again, he's fae. We probably move too slowly for him.

"The city will not be safe. We must hide in the forest outside the walls. Quickly!" Argus pleads.

"What about Buttercup?" I can't leave her to the blights. She may not have magic, but that doesn't necessarily mean they can't hurt her.

"The castle is in the opposite direction. There is no time. Come!" Argus grabs my hand and drags me toward the city gates, Dimitri following behind.

Hundreds of people fill the streets, and it's so packed that those at the edges get crushed against the walls of the buildings.

"Hurry!" Argus frantically ushers us toward our way out. We're so close, but the blight horde is on our heels. I hear dozens of shouts as the fae at the back of the crowd weaken, the blight's poison falling upon them and draining their magic.

At last, we reach the open gates. Many of the out-of-town fae mount their horses and stags, while others enter their carriages. But we race for the bordering forest, hoping the blight at our backs will stick to the city.

Behind us, a flash of blue light creates a dome over the city. Could it be the barrier the queen said the scepter could make? The light is blinding against the overwhelming darkness. There's no other light because the blight horde blocks the moon and stars.

We reach the forest. It's not as vast as the Eastern Forest, but hopefully it will still hide us. And now we wait.

* * *

Soft footsteps sound nearby, barely perceptible above the clamor in Careny. They get louder; whoever approaches must be close. Wondering who could be coming, I look to Argus, but the guard doesn't appear concerned.

He pulls out a pouch with a waterskin and hands it to Dimitri and me. "Drink," he says. "You will need your strength."

I'm not thirsty, but I don't argue. Perhaps the drink will invigorate me. So, I take a few gulps before passing it to my ... to Dimitri.

It tastes sweet but burns like peppermint. When it hits my belly, a flood of warmth spreads through me. Dimitri finishes it off.

The footsteps come to a halt, and I turn to see Ardwyn. He doesn't glance at me once as he enters our little makeshift hiding place. Instead, he speaks only to Argus. "Have you given it to them?"

“Yes,” Argus replies, pulling out a different waterskin and taking a swig.

“How long?”

“Should be anytime now.” Argus puts the waterskin back in his pouch. Why did he bring a pouch of waterskins to the festival?

The words the guard and the elf speak *sound* innocent, but their tone ... My brain is too slow and fuzzy to figure out why warning bells are going off in my head. I suddenly feel very heavy and eerily calm. Too calm for the situation we just escaped. Are still escaping.

“It’s kicking in,” the guard says as I tip over, unable to hold myself up any longer. My face presses into the hard dirt, twigs scratching my cheek.

“Good. Restrain them.” Ardwyn rustles in the leather bag he carries while Argus binds our hands and feet. Did the elf have that bag at the festival? I don’t remember him carrying it around. He continues to rifle through it for something.

“Wh—” I try to say, but my mouth isn’t working.

“I’ve given you a mild paralytic,” Argus explains. “It will wear off in a few hours if you don’t fight it.”

In front of me, Ardwyn pulls out the whistle he was searching for and blows it. It doesn’t make a sound, but he seems undeterred. The poison courses through my system, making my eyes too heavy to keep watching him, but before I pass out, I swear, I hear the flapping of wings.

* * *

I wake on the back of a horse with enormous, feathered wings. The ground is far, far below me, and I recognize none of it. It doesn’t look like Careny, the Eastern Forest, the Northern Mountains, or anywhere I’ve been so far. The land below is a wasteland, devoid of color and life. A firm body behind me pulls me closer.

“Steady,” the traitorous elf says. I stiffen at his musical voice.

To the right, Dimitri rides a similar creature with Argus. Its mane and tail blow in the wind. If I wasn't so angry, I might stop to admire its elegant beauty. A third pegasus carries several packs behind that one.

"Where are you taking us?" I demand, though I can't see my captor from this angle. Putting steel in my voice, I ignore the way his arms tighten around me. I may actually kill him.

"All in good time, little human."

Suddenly, I feel nausea at the nickname he gave me. Or is it the heights? It's both. Definitely both.

How long have Ardwyn and Argus been conspiring? I've not once seen them speak to each other. The betrayal runs deep, and I can hardly look at either of them.

After what feels like an age but is probably only a few hours, the sun sinks below the horizon, and the air turns cold. Ardwyn must give an unspoken signal because the pegasi descend to the valley below, where a stream glows orange in the sunset. We land within a circle of trees, so perfectly spaced they must have been planted there. As the sky darkens into twilight, I ponder my situation and the betrayal that has cut me deeply. I can't even look at my captors.

Argus sets to building a fire, while Ardwyn unloads us and sits us upright against a log. The paralytic has worn off by now, and while both of our captors are distracted, I whisper to Dimitri.

"We need a plan. Do you still have your dagger on you, so we can cut these bonds?" I wiggle my wrists.

"No," he answers. "They took everything while we were unconscious."

"See any sharp rocks nearby?"

"Again, no."

"Well, that's super helpful." I sigh in aggravation, blowing an errant hair out of my face. "Oh, I know! Try using your powers to burn the bindings."

“I already tried that. I can’t access my powers.” For what it’s worth, he doesn’t sound defeated. Instead, he sounds determined to get out of this mess.

“Crap.... I can’t access mine either.” I lean back against the log.

“We’ll just have to wait for an opportunity to escape.” He falls quiet as Ardwyn approaches.

“I want to make a proposal,” the elf says. “You are entirely at my mercy, so don’t think of escaping. However, I want to tell you a story and then make you an offer.”

My ... Dimitri and I remain silent. Then Ardwyn continues as he paces the camp. “Queen Siobhan is on the wrong side of the war. Her ambitions are too small. That is why I’ve secretly partnered with Mordred”—he gestures to Argus, and I take a sharp intake of breath at the revelation that my guard has been Mordred all along—“to further Barlow’s noble cause. Queen Ash may call him a tyrant, but Barlow strives for a better world, one where power reigns, and the powerful create more power. The world he wants for us all will see new kinds of power unleashed, new creatures, a new world. A new age.

“The seer in Careny was going to warn you of Barlow’s plans, and I couldn’t allow him to thwart mine, so he met an ... *unfortunate* accident with persuasion.”

“I thought you said Queen Ash was the one who only serves herself. You said I couldn’t trust her.” Hurt and anger lace my words, but I don’t let any fear show.

“About that...” He pauses his pacing to look at me. “*I lied.*”

My jaw drops at the new revelation of betrayal, but he doesn’t stop there.

“There’s nothing wrong with the fae queen, *per se*,” he says, “but the world she envisions is limited. There’s no room for growth, for ascension.”

I think back on all the times Ardwyn told me not to trust Queen Ash, how intense his gaze had been each time. I level

an accusing glare at him. “Did you use persuasion on me?”

“Smart girl,” he says, confirming my suspicions.

“Was any of it real?” I demand. I have to know. Because if I had been so completely bamboozled, then I really owe Dimitri an apology. And I owe myself a slap in the face.

Ardwyn sighs. “At first, no. At first, my job was to isolate and seduce you, so you would be more willing to comply. But then it became real for me. Which brings me to my offer ... Join me. Join me and rule at my side. Together, we would be a force to be reckoned with. Think of it: the world’s most influential elf and its only conduit. We’d be unstoppable. There is room for us in this new world ... if you accept. You can either join me, and together we can rule the realms ... or you can become just another pretty thing that needs undoing.” And just like that, the illusion shatters, and I see Ardwyn for who he really is. His eyes glaze over with impassioned fervor as he speaks, then he looks at me as if it’s the most logical argument ever made.

My words rough and harsh, I grit out, “I will *never* join you. I will fight you until my dying breath, and even my death shall work against you.”

The elf frowns, a slight downward tilt of his lips. “Somehow, I think you’ll change your mind before the end.”

“Don’t count on it,” I seethe.

Dimitri has never liked the traitorous elf. Now I wish I would have listened to him. If Ardwyn’s goal was isolation, he succeeded, even if I played a role in it, too. I only hope I can repair the damage before it’s too late. I was wrong to push Dimitri away, and I won’t make the same mistake again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Retrospection

HYACINTH SITS IN the damp, dark cell in shackles. Next to her is Birch, the changeling who impersonated Dimitri. He's unconscious. The steady dripping of water echoes from the other side of the room, and one of her hairs has been tickling her nose for the past ten minutes.

"Who are you?" demands the king. "Where is my daughter?" It's not the first time he's asked, and it surely won't be the last. King Frederic raises his hand as if to strike her, but before he can, an officer of the guard enters.

"Your Majesty, our scout was able to access the portal to Faerie. What do you want him to do?"

"Send him in," the king orders. "Have him gather as much information as he can. If the fae took Shayna, we'll go to war."

Hyacinth stiffens at the declaration.

Turning to her, the king smiles, a deadly gleam in his eyes. "Either you can tell me what I need to know or I can force it out of you. But you won't leave this cell without answers. Now, where is the real princess?"

Hyacinth closes her eyes and prepares herself for a long night.

* * *

My anger burns hotter than the campfire as I seethe next to Dimitri. They removed our bonds, so we could eat, but they watch us closely for any signs of bolting. I'm not sure where we would go if we tried. We are so far from any familiar landmarks that I doubt we could find our way back without help.

The traitorous elf sits on a log, eating his scone and appearing as if it's a typical day in his life. I turn to Dimitri when Ardwyn isn't looking. "Where do you think they're taking us?" I whisper.

“To Barlow, I assume,” he whispers back. He looks as angry as I am, his gaze steely. Taking a hesitant sip of his water, he adds, “While we’re here, we might as well talk about what happened between us.”

“You think now is a good time?” I balk.

“No, but I think we can’t be sure there’ll be another time.” He subtly reaches for my hand. “If we may die, I don’t want to die leaving things as they are between us.”

I give him a grim nod. “Very well.”

Dimitri runs the hand not holding mine through his hair, then he blows out breath. “First, I wanted to apologize. I overreacted that morning. I never should have walked out on you. For that, I am truly sorry.” He meets my gaze.

“Yes, you did overreact, but I can understand your fears.” *I just don’t have to like them*, I think to myself.

“That’s just it, though. My fears weren’t worth driving you away. You mean everything to me, even more than my life. It shouldn’t have taken losing you to make me realize that.”

Little by little, the ice in my heart begins to melt. He gazes at me with such a forlorn, puppy-dog look that I can’t help the way my eyes soften. It’s so hard to hate him, especially when I love him so much.

“It was my fault as much as yours,” I say. “I was too quick to anger, and I judged you too harshly.”

“Thanks, love, but I place none of the blame on you. It was my own cowardice that drove the wedge between us.” He wraps his arm around my shoulder and whispers in my ear, “We’ll find a way to get out of this, and when we do, I promise I’ll stand up to the king. I will fight for us.”

Ardwyn doesn’t give me any time for my heart to warm at my love’s declaration—and yes, I’m pleased to call him my love again. From across the camp, the elf’s cold words rise above the hooting of a nearby owl and the cacophony of crickets in the underbrush. “Alright, you lovebirds. You’d better not be conspiring over there. Shayna, come sit by me.”

He pats the log beside him, and I bristle, both at his tone and at the command.

We hadn't been plotting our escape, but perhaps we should have been. If Ardwyn is going to keep us on a tight leash, we should use every moment alone to figure out a plan. How else are we going to escape?

"That wasn't a request," says the elf.

Deciding that acting the part of obedient prisoner might lower Ardwyn's guard—and make it easier to escape—I rise. Then I step around the campfire and lower myself onto the log next to him. A satisfied smirk flits across his face before disappearing as quickly as it came.

"You haven't run yet," the traitor observes.

What would be the point? I think, but instead, I say, "I've been considering your offer." I haven't, but if he thinks I'm open to it, then it will buy us time to escape.

"Oh?" He perks up. "I thought you said you would never join me. What changed your mind?"

"I want to live," I say as simply as I can. I need to be careful how I handle this. The elf has been around me long enough to know if I'm being honest or not. It's true that I don't want to die, but my will to live didn't change my mind.

Ardwyn laughs, throwing back his head with the strength of it. He laughs for a full minute before he settles, and nervousness fills me, putting me on edge. "Little human," he simpers, "I've been alive too many centuries to fall for that trick. No. You haven't suddenly decided to switch sides. But one day, you will."

I scowl, angling my body further away from him. "Why don't you just compel me to join you?"

The elf's smile is indulgent, as if he's speaking to a child. "The damage long-term compulsion can do to a mind ..." He shakes his head, causing a strand of silvery hair to fall into his face. "No. I need your mind sharp, and so does Barlow. Besides, I prefer willing partners. If I compelled you to join

me—and to love me—it wouldn't be real. Darling, I want us to be real. I will simply have to convince you.”

I stiffen at his words, and my lip curls in a disgusted sneer. “I could never love you.”

“In time, you will.”

In all of our training sessions, I never caught on to how crazy the elf was. He hid it well. My train of thought brings up another question. “Why bother training me at all? You only made me a stronger adversary.”

Ardwyn's expression turns contemplative as he absently strokes Robin's feathers. “What we need you for requires you to be at your strongest. In time, you'll see we'll do better as your allies. That's the thing about time.... If you don't start preparations early, it can run out. I trained you in the hopes you could help our cause. If you cannot, then your usefulness will run out.”

“What do you need me for?”

Ardwyn stills, and for a moment, I think he won't answer. But then he says, “I think I'll let Barlow explain that when we arrive.”

* * *

We settle down for the night in the clearing, surrounded by the circle of trees. It doesn't offer us much cover, but our captors don't seem worried about that. Before he lies down, my former guard binds Dimitri and me again.

It's hard to believe Argus has been Mordred all this time. No wonder his name wasn't that of a tree or plant; it wasn't his name at all. Do all of Barlow's henchmen have regular names, too?

Mordred, the queen's former ward and Barlow's most esteemed spy, secretly infiltrated the guards right under the queen's nose. How did he do it without being recognized? He'd been in the same room as Queen Ash and me multiple times, and she'd never suspected. I eye him, suspicion curdling my gut, but he simply reclines and closes his eyes as Ardwyn takes the first watch.

Dimitri lies next to me, as wide awake as I am. He doesn't take his eyes off our captors. Ardwyn's sparrow perches on a log next to us, one eye open to watch us. He will surely report our every movement to Ardwyn. Is that how the elf knew Father disapproved of Dimitri? Did he send Robin to spy on us? My gut curdles even further.

"You should sleep," Dimitri whispers. "I'll wake you if anything changes."

I open my mouth to protest, but I am so tired. I'll be useless in an escape if I don't rest, and our powers still haven't returned. Could it be something in the food or drink they gave us? I recall the bitterness of the drink Mordred offered us before Ardwyn showed up just outside Careny; the memory of the betrayal rips the wound open anew.

Finally, I nod. "Okay."

Within moments, I'm asleep. Queen Siobhan hasn't visited my dreams since before Ardwyn's betrayal. Does she know of his treachery? Does she condone it? When Ardwyn wakes me, I'm disappointed at the Elven queen's absence and my inability to question her because of it.

"Okay, little human. It's time to keep moving," the elf says as he nudges me with the toe of his boot.

Dimitri looks pale next to me as he jolts upward. Did he sleep at all last night? We rise with the help of Ardwyn and Mordred, and they drape us over the backs of the pegasi. After they strap our packs to their third pegasus, we're off.

They didn't bother blindfolding us. Does that mean they don't think we'll be able to find our way back to Careny, or does it mean we won't make it out of this alive? I don't like the thought of either option, though dying is far less agreeable.

The chill wind is biting against my face, chapping my lips and causing my eyes to water. We soar high over the ground, passing hills, valleys, and mountains. We fly so far and fast that the land below is nearly a blur. I can't tell what direction we're traveling, but I can tell we're quickly covering a great distance. The pegasi fly as fast as the horse runs, and they

don't tire easily. But such is the case with many magical creatures.

Ardwyn's warmth behind me is a constant reminder of my naïveté, and every time he adjusts in the saddle, a fresh burst of fury rolls through me. How could I have been so deceived? I suspect the elf must have spent a great deal of his long life mastering manipulation because he played me well.

After a few hours, I shift uncomfortably. "When are we stopping next? I have to go."

"You're not going anywhere but to Barlow, little human."

"No, you misunderstand. I have to *go*." I shift again, the discomfort of a full bladder weighing on me.

"Oh." Ardwyn's breath tickles my neck as he speaks. "We can stop to let you relieve yourself and stretch your legs. But be quick. Barlow is an impatient man, and too many breaks will delay us further."

The pegasi slow and descend in a deep valley. There is no cover of trees or any hill to hide behind for privacy. Our captors remove our bonds, and a flush spreads over my cheeks as I walk a few paces away. The men turn their backs, and I do my business. Before I return, I feel for that layer of energy, but though the thread of power is there, I can't access it. Disappointment and despair fill me as I return to my captors.

Dimitri also took the time to stretch his legs and empty his bladder. I raise my eyebrows at him in silent question when Ardwyn and Mordred aren't looking. He frowns and shakes his head. For the time being, we're stuck, and I'm fresh out of ideas.

The grass in this valley is dead, just dry brown dust beneath our feet. In the distance, dead trees with pale white leaves stand like a forest graveyard. There is no color or vibrancy anywhere in this land, the only beauty being the blue sky. It even smells empty here, like a land devoid of life.

"Back on the pegasi," says the traitorous elf, binding us again. He lifts me onto his black steed, while Mordred puts Dimitri on his chestnut pegasus. I attempt to bond with the

black one—thinking maybe if I can bond the creature, I can have a hope of escape—but either that part of my power is also suppressed or the mare’s thoughts are blocked off. My guess it’s the former. Could it be both?

We travel another few hours before stopping to eat and relieve ourselves once more. We hadn’t eaten since last night, and I was so weak. But finally, the elf provided us with jerky and bread. Do they not need to eat often, or are they trying to put as much distance as possible between us and Careny?

The sun is low in the sky when we finish eating. It’s snowing, a light dusting of fluff covering the ground. I shiver. It wasn’t this cold in Careny, and I didn’t expect to travel so far. So, I didn’t bring a cloak.

When my teeth start chattering, Ardwyn takes pity on me. “Can’t have you dying prematurely,” he says, wrapping a wool blanket around my trembling shoulders. Then he builds a fire.

Soon I’m warm enough that I stop shaking, but my heart is still cold and unforgiving. If we make it out of this, the elf will pay. He and Mordred both.

The only thing keeping me going is the possibility that if we go to Barlow, we may also go to Serena. If she’s there, I can free her. I just need my powers back. No, *we* do. I’ll need Dimitri’s aid to free her.

“We’re close,” Ardwyn says. “You two should sleep. When we arrive tomorrow, you’ll go straight to Barlow.”

Barlow. The fae who plunged Faerie further into oblivion, whose blight horde has killed a vast portion of land and stolen countless beings’ magic. Barlow, who kidnapped my sister and made her his slave.

Oh yes, I’m ready to confront that fae. And when I do, he’ll regret ever hearing of me or Serena.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The Black Castle

BARLOW'S FORTRESS RIVALS Careny in size, but it surpasses it in terms of being intimidating. Made of towering black stone walls and turrets, it's darker than night. Fitting for a fae who spends his days performing dark deeds. Dread as black as the obsidian castle before us pools in my stomach.

Ardwyn gives the signal, and the pegasi descend to the courtyard below. Aside from how imposing the castle itself is, the lawn is as manicured and tended as Careny's. A vast garden covers the courtyard, with paths of white stone being the only interruptions. Who would have thought the Dark Lord would care about landscaping?

Ardwyn helps me off his black mare, and he and Mordred untie our feet, leaving our hands bound. My eyes scan the area, looking for an escape route. Who knows what will happen if we enter the castle? There are only two guards in the courtyard. Perhaps Dim and I can—

"Don't even think of it," Ardwyn murmurs in my ear. "The castle and grounds are warded. No one enters or leaves without permission."

My chest tightens. *There goes that plan.*

Ardwyn leads us through the castle gates, and we step between the two guards manning the portcullis. Neither of them blinks. It's as if our presence is expected.

Inside the walls is an inner courtyard of the same black stone. It's far less resplendent than the outer courtyard, and there are many doors and hidden alcoves. Grotesque statues line the castle walls, fae with faces frozen in horror and likenesses of Unseelie creatures standing over them.

Well, this is certainly inviting, I think, not letting my gaze linger on the statues. If I do, I may freeze just as they do.

Ardwyn opens a side door and pulls me through. Mordred and Dimitri enter soon after. This room is just a long hall,

dotted with torches but otherwise bare. The walls are made of the same black stone, and they seem to hum with energy.

“Through here,” the elf whispers.

“Where does this lead?” I ask, but Ardwyn shushes me. I arch a brow but shut my mouth. *Why the secrecy?* I wonder.

We must walk several hundred paces before the hall curves, then several doors begin to dot the walls, spaced in a chaotic, uneven pattern ... or no pattern at all. They are made of solid wood, with a torch on either side at shoulder level. We pass at least a dozen identical doors before Ardwyn stops at one, his posture stiff.

“Speak to no one,” he says. “Do not draw attention. Keep your heads down, and do not make eye contact with anyone.”

I would argue or ask questions if not for the set of his shoulders and the tension in his jaw. As if sensing the danger at a soul-deep level, my heart tells me now is not the time to disobey. So, I nod, and the traitorous elf relaxes a little.

He opens the door.

We enter and walk through a chamber with servants and strange creatures. Ardwyn leads us on, glaring at anyone who pays too close attention to us. I’m sure the pink cream I use to cover up my humanity has faded by now.

Soon we come to another hall of doors, and Ardwyn breathes a sigh of relief when we close the door to the chamber behind us. Then he takes us through yet another solid wood door. If I thought I could pay attention to where we’re going and find my way out on my own again, I was wrong. I’m thoroughly lost when he opens this door, takes us down another hall, and stops at an iron door.

Inside is an unfinished room that resembles a cave. The rough walls are made of the same obsidian as the castle, but the humming energy in the room is undeniable. Catching me staring, Ardwyn answers my unspoken question. “It’s the wards. You won’t be able to leave this room on your own, even if you use your powers. The wards will prevent you from

accessing magic to escape or to harm the residents of the castle.”

The elf unbinds our hands, and I rub my raw wrists. My powers haven't returned yet, but he speaks as if they could return at any moment. It would be awful to have them back but still be just as powerless.

Ardwyn and Mordred leave Dimitri and me, locking the door behind them, though I didn't see either of them with a key. I turn and survey the room. There's a small, wooden table and two rickety chairs on one wall and a tiny bed on the opposite wall. A window lets in a meager amount of light from outside, but it's too high to reach, even if we stood on the table. And if we could reach it, there would be no escape that way; thick iron bars cover the panes, preventing all hope of exit.

We wait in the bare room for what feels like hours, tense and unwilling to yield. Dimitri paces, and I sit in one of the chairs. If there was a rug on the floor, he would have worn a hole in it by now.

“We need a plan,” I say. “I don't like being at Barlow's mercy.” A pause. “Nor Ardwyn's.”

Dimitri gestures to the walls. “Have you heard of fae wards?” I shake my head. “They're nearly impenetrable. Unless you have any stardust, we're stuck here.”

My hope flickers. Stardust is the rarest and most precious substance in the world. Once every three to five hundred years, a star falls from the heavens. Men from all over race to the site to mine it. If they're lucky, they get enough stardust to create all sorts of magics. It is the only substance that can reshape any magical object to its user's will.

“There must be a way,” I insist.

“There isn't. Trust me.” He stops pacing and strides toward me, taking my hand in his. “All is not lost, love. We'll use cunning and patiently wait for the right moment to make our escape. They said the grounds are warded, so we need

permission to leave. We'll just wait until we're on the grounds, but until then, we find a way to gain permission."

Defeated, I bite my lip and nod. He takes my face in both of his warm, firm hands, the calluses scraping against my cheeks. "Look at me," he whispers, voice soft and gentle.

I lift my eyes to his, ignoring the burning threat of tears.

"You're strong, Shay. You're the most powerful woman I know, and I'm not merely talking about your abilities. When you enter a room, every eye turns to you. Your presence, the way you carry yourself ... it makes you impossible to ignore. I've noticed you from the moment I laid eyes on you. I fought it, but I knew one day, you'd be mine. There is no one else for me."

My heart skips a beat, but he continues. "You're powerful. Show them you won't be broken."

"I will."

Dimitri pulls me into a hug, and I steel myself for whatever is to come. Ardwyn refused to tell me what Barlow's plans for me were, but I doubt they're good. Whatever he wants, I need to find a way to escape before he either forces me to comply or kills me.

Just then, the door opens, and Dimitri and I break apart. In saunters a dark-haired fae with cold, intelligent eyes. I know him; it's the fae from my vision of the future at the Tree of Beginnings and Endings. The one I saw standing next to an angry blight, ordering it to charge at me. It's the fae who took Serena.

Past and present collide, and understanding spreads over me.

This is Barlow.

"If it isn't the infamous *secondborn*," he drawls. "I've been waiting a long time for you."

I couldn't care less.

"Your sister is extraordinary," the fae continues, coming closer. "I'd be willing to bet you're equally talented." He

brushes the back of his hand along my cheek, and it takes everything in me to keep from flinching. My lip quivers to keep from peeling back in distaste, and I let the mask of indifference I wore so often in Father's court slide over my face. I will give this scum nothing.

"What, you've nothing to say to that?" Barlow queries. "Your sister had plenty to say about you." His thumb drags across my lower lip as he leans in to whisper in my ear. "*Once I broke her.*"

"Get away from her!" Dimitri growls, hands glowing, though he doesn't attack.

"Naughty child," Barlow tsks. "Don't worry. I'll not harm her yet. I have plans for this one." He turns back to me.

Suddenly, I find my voice. Thankfully, it doesn't tremble when I ask, "And what might those be?"

"Patience, precious," the fae chides. His expression is one a father might give a child who got into the sweets before supper. His face would be handsome if not for the dangerous glint in his intelligent eyes, a glint that suggests he's a viper among sheep. "First, I must see if you're capable of what I need. Your first test is at dawn. I suggest you both rest. You'll need it if you are to survive."

With that, the fae retreats to the door. Once he's gone, I let myself relax a little, my shoulders slumping. I may not have shown it, but Barlow's visit shook me.

Dimitri rubs a spot between my shoulder blades as I worry about what the Dark Lord could possibly want with me. Once we've waited long enough to be sure the fae is gone, my love speaks. "Someday, we will kill that filth. Mark my words, we will kill him for what he's done to Serena, to you, and to Faerie. He shan't escape the consequences of his actions."

Whether it's a vow or a promise doesn't matter. What does matter is that it's the truth. So, we rest, and we plot our escape, not knowing what the dawn will bring.

* * *

Tulio, King Frederick's informant and trusted spy, is a master of illusions. His father used to boast that he married a woman with fae blood, while his own blood held generations of humans who had accessed the ancient magics. So, his parents were always useful to the king of Feristle.

When Tulio was born, they knew right away he was a special child. He didn't cry once, and he regarded everyone with eyes full of wisdom beyond his years. The first time he demonstrated his abilities, he gave his mum and da the fright of their lives. At just one month old, he could weave illusions well enough to cloak his presence. When his mum checked on him and didn't see him in his crib, her wailing shocked him enough to drop the illusion.

From then on, Tulio's mum and da sought to hide his abilities, for they knew the king kept them around for their usefulness. But if he knew just how powerful the mixing of their bloodlines turned out to be, the king might take Tulio and attempt to create more hybrids.

In Tulio's sixth year, he was discovered, and Mum and Da's greatest fear was realized. King Frederick *strongly requested* the boy's presence at the castle, and Mum and Da were forced to comply. You don't say no to the king. That was the day King Frederick enlisted Tulio's services. The king called it "an honor to the boy and his family" and "a promotion of station." He made Mum and Da the duke and duchess of a small village no one in Feristle had heard of. They were no longer a mere lord and lady but also no longer active in the rearing of their only child.

The king took Tulio under his wing, and to prevent interference in his molding and shaping, he sent Mum and Da to the small village. "To oversee it," he'd said.

And so, Tulio grew into King Frederick's most valuable asset. But he never forgot. And he never forgave. He chose to remember, vowing that one day, he would see the king pay.

How foolish of the human king to trust him. A mistake that will cost him and one he'll not likely forget.

Tulio, now twenty-five years of age and having seen Mum and Da only twice since they were sent away, stands before the portal to Faerie. Unlike the king's human soldiers, he has no need to be led through to enter. His fae ancestry sees to that. The portal will recognize him as soon as he breaches it, welcoming him home.

Mum told him enough stories in his childhood to assure him of that. Dear Mum. He often wonders how she is and if she and Da miss him as much as he does them. The king stole time from them. Time is one commodity that, once spent, one can never get back.

So, he will do this for Mum and Da. He will see to it that King Frederick pays for the time lost if it's the last thing he does. The king used him for years. Perhaps he will pay in years. He won't have any more if he's dead.

Tulio smiles and straightens the pack on his back. Then he steps through the portal.

* * *

Dimitri watches Shayna as she tosses fitfully in her sleep. A strange necklace hangs about her neck, glinting in the faint light of the moon through the window. *Where did she get that?* he wonders.

He curses himself for his stupidity. If he hadn't been such a fool and abandoned her, then maybe it would have been him who got her to safety during the blight attack at the festival. Or maybe they'd still be right where they're at, albeit through other means.

He scowls. This is all that elf's fault. From the moment Dimitri first saw Ardwyn, he knew he was trouble. He couldn't force Shayna to stay away from him without sounding like a possessive prick. But *oh*, how he wanted to. He wanted to throw her over his shoulder and stalk to his room like a Neanderthal. But she wouldn't have taken kindly to that.

His woman hates being controlled. Her father does enough of that, and he'd die before he added to the weights already upon her. He glances at her creamy skin. She sweated off the

abhorrent pink color during the journey here and finally looks more like herself.

Shayna has always been beautiful, and her fierce determination makes him want to abandon all reason. He was a fool to leave her, but he will spend every day of his life making up for it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The First Test

THE FIRST LIGHT of dawn breaks through the small window in our holding chamber like a blaze across the sky. No sooner does the light touch my face than the door opens, and Barlow strides in, accompanied by Ardwyn. Both of them wear full armor, weapons strapped to their sides.

“Well, princess,” the Dark Lord says, “are you ready for your first test?” I don’t answer, and he takes my silence as affirmation, tossing me a worn tunic and breeches. “Dress. We’ll collect you in five minutes.”

They walk out, leaving me alone in the room with Dimitri. I’m still wearing the light-green, flower-embroidered dress I wore to the festival, which gives me limited range of motion—unless I want to get caught in it. Regardless of what they have planned for me, these new clothes will make it easier to move ... and therefore easier to escape.

Dimitri examines the dust in the corner while I pull on the tunic and button the breeches. Thankfully, the clothes fit, and the shoes I wore during the festival give added protection on all terrain. Once finished, I step up behind my love.

His face is grim, much like mine. “Be strong and courageous,” he whispers, threading his fingers through mine. “We’ve come this far. You *will* survive. For me, for Serena, but most importantly, for *you*.”

“I promise,” I say against his shoulder.

The door opens.

“Come, princess,” Barlow purrs, his voice low and seductive.

I obey, allowing him to lead me into the hallway and through a series of doors. Dimitri follows.

“Ardwyn tells me you’re a conduit,” the fae says. *Did he now?* “If so, it would greatly further our plans. But I don’t

believe in blind trust, so let's prove his claims, shall we?"

I look at the traitorous elf. He stares straight ahead as we walk, his expression neutral. Then I face Barlow. "Did Ardwyn also tell you that one of the last times I used that power, I nearly destroyed Careny and the people in it?"

"Yes, well, you've been through training since, no?"

I grit my teeth. Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing to lose control in Barlow's court. But the wreckage ... Would I know myself? Would I turn on Dimitri? "My control isn't perfect," I finally say.

"Well, you're in luck because I've got the perfect test for you to show me what you're capable of," croons Barlow.

I see there's no getting out of this. So, reluctantly, I follow, Ardwyn taking up our rear. I can feel Dimitri's concern like a tangible force hanging in the air between us as we walk down hall after hall.

Soon the floor slopes downward, and the air grows musty. This hall is narrower, its walls made of dirt instead of the thrumming obsidian. All at once, the thread of my power strengthens within me. I feel for that extra layer of energy and grasp it. It's malleable.

Keeping the information to myself for now, I plod along, biding my time. A successful escape will depend on the right opportunity, not just the first one. I glance at Dimitri, trying to convey a message without alerting Ardwyn behind him. But it's hard to communicate without words, and he doesn't seem to understand. His brow furrows in apparent confusion, so I shake my head and face forward again.

As if reading my thoughts, Barlow says, "This tunnel is older than Castle Faraghan, but I built my home to reflect the labyrinth below. The labyrinth isn't as heavily warded as the castle, but it's not without its dangers." A manic gleam fills his eyes. "While you may be able to access your abilities better here, the labyrinth answers to me, and any treachery will be ... snuffed out."

We walk through an endless maze of dirt and stone. The entire time, I feel like I'm being watched. But every time I glance around, there's only dirt and stone and wall after wall. We pass some rooms as we go: one that holds empty cages, another that holds cages with disturbing-looking Unseelie creatures, and one that holds only a shimmering veil between an archway of twisted bone.

Finally, we turn a corner and enter the top level of an underground amphitheater. Its walls are dozens of yards high, with rows of stone seating arranged in an ascending pattern from the empty central floor to the walls. But the room itself is not the most remarkable thing to note; it's what's in the center of the arena.

I'd never seen a Sluagh before—and never intended to—but I have now. With bulky muscle and unnatural stillness, it towers more than double a man's height. Giant, feathered wings protrude from its back, and long, taloned fingers tug at the chains binding its ankles to the floor. It turns its cold, ancient eyes on us. If not for the malice in its eyes, one would say it was handsome. However, there is no mistaking the gleam of sadistic promise in its gray eyes and the inhuman way it carries itself. Its masculine chest is bare, and it wears only a loincloth.

"Beautiful, isn't he?" Barlow hums, his tone appreciative. "Soul-eaters, ferrymen of the lost. And this one's as wicked as they come. A perfect test, don't you think? If you are a conduit, you'll have no trouble subduing the creature. If not"—Barlow shrugs—"then you're worse than dead."

I fight the urge to vomit, though my stomach is empty. I haven't eaten since before we arrived at the Black Castle—what I called Castle Faraghan—and I feel the weakness in my bones. Terror sends an icy shiver through me. Can the creature below smell fear?

If I am a conduit, he'd said. I am, but I'm not nearly as capable of controlling it as I'll need to be when fighting one of these. A Sluagh. He captured an actual Sluagh. One from the Wild Hunt, no less.

“Oh, but you haven’t heard the best part,” the Dark Lord continues. “I gave him your scent, courtesy of Ardwyn. If you refuse to fight him now, I’ll simply release him to hunt you. There is no choice. One way or another, you will be tested.”

I turn to glare at Ardwyn. The elf doesn’t have the decency to look abashed. His face is still set in that neutral mask. Is it a mask? Does he truly not care? Fresh betrayal rolls through me, and I clench my fists.

If Barlow releases the Sluagh, he might not stop at me, or he could mow down Dimitri before even getting to me. I can’t put my love at risk. Besides, one less monster in this world is fine by me.

Barlow hands me a bone dagger. “You’ll need this. Don’t even think of using it on me or Ardwyn; the labyrinth will swiftly punish any treachery.”

I clasp the dagger in my hand, take a deep, shuddering breath, and jump down into the arena. My already weak knees tremble further upon landing.

“Release it!” Barlow shouts in the silence. The labyrinth obeys.

With an almost inaudible click, the chains fall from the creature, and it turns its haunting face to me.

The Sluagh sniffs. Once. Twice. Tasting and inhaling my scent like a mouthwatering aroma. Then it takes a single step closer.

Quickly, I tug on that layer of energy and form a bolt. As if sensing my intentions, the Sluagh’s dry lip curls. It bares its teeth, revealing two rows worth of sharp points, perfect for ripping into flesh. I shudder at the thought of what those teeth might feel like in my skin.

A bead of sweat drips down the nape of my neck. Who will move first? We play a calculated mental game as we size each other up. Its cold, dead eyes are unblinking as they watch my every move.

The Sluagh charges. I only have time to react because, as still as it was, the creature is swift. I dodge and spin, losing my

hold on my bolt, and we face each other again. The soul-eater doesn't give me time to regroup before it lunges again.

This time, I swipe out with the bone dagger as I dodge it. It sinks into the flesh of its arm, and I rejoice. But within moments, the skin knits itself back together as if by magic. What did I expect? The creature probably is magical.

"You can't harm it unless you weaken it first," Barlow calls. "If you remove its magic, it will be unable to heal."

The Dark Lord is taking a gamble, I realize. Only a conduit would be able to defeat a Sluagh because only a conduit can strip one of its powers and healing abilities. So, *this* is what he's playing at.

Drawing upon that layer of energy again, I separate another bolt. The Sluagh and I circle each other again. Its maw drips a strange black substance onto the dirt. I throw the bolt.

Faster than I would have thought possible, my opponent dodges. Can it see my energy just as I can? I narrow my eyes.

Think. Think. I need to gain the upper hand before I end up as a meal for this thing.

The Sluagh lunges. Anticipating my dodge, it leaps over my head, raking its claws into my shoulder as it flips and faces me again.

Cold. Despair. Agony.

The wound feels like an open portal, and I'm moments from hurtling through it. I glance at my shoulder with the little energy that now remains as Dimitri bellows my name above. My tunic is shredded, but instead of a puncture wound, three black lines mar my skin, as if only that patch of skin spent hours in freezing temperatures. It feels like it, too.

Anguish. Suffering.

A golden ball of light soars past my ear, sinking into the Sluagh and putting a hole in its stomach. Dimitri's distraction incapacitates the creature long enough for me to snap out of its hold. Like a blindfold being removed, I can see clearly again, and the clawing anguish that rolled over me in waves ceases.

“Now, Shayna!” Dimitri shouts, and I spare no more time.

Faster than I’ve ever done it before, I pull a bolt of energy from me and shoot it at the Sluagh. Without conscious thought, I draw the Sluagh’s pulsing, dark energy into the bolt, then I yank it back to me. In front of me, the creature withers, solidifying into a dry husk.

“Incredible,” I hear Barlow exclaim ... right as I shove the bone dagger deep into the creature’s heart.

There’s something so ancient and unsettling about the power that remains in me. It feels like being wrapped and squeezed but also being unraveled. All at once, I’m both powerful and powerless. Powerful because I’ve never felt stronger than I do at this moment. Powerless because, like a tidal wave, the Sluagh’s energy crashes over me, pulling me under.

It’s alien. As unnatural as the creature itself. It takes everything in me to resist the gnawing hunger of the chase.

I look up at Barlow from my place on the dirt floor of the arena. The fae is smug, not bothering to hide the victorious gleam in his eyes. Whatever the purpose of this test, I’ve just played right into his hands.

“We have our victor!” he calls. “Do you want to know what your prize is?”

“Dare I ask?” Unbridled sarcasm drips like oil from my words.

“Now, now,” the fae chides. “You don’t want to ruin the game before it begins.” He beckons me to him.

Wisely, I bite my tongue, though I want nothing more than to chew him out. As I ascend the stairs, I shake off the lingering phantom coldness from the Sluagh’s scratch. The mark has disappeared, but the effects are taking their time to fade.

“Your prize, dear,” Barlow says, the term of endearment turning my gut sour, “is to live another day and to move on to the next test.”

Wonderful.

The temptation to use the Sluagh's stolen power on him is almost too great. But his warning about the labyrinth stops me. Somehow, my gut tells me that it wasn't an empty threat. This place feels sentient, and I still feel the sensation of being watched.

The Dark Lord and his elf lead us back through the labyrinth again. We make all the same turns, but the rooms are different. Has the layout changed, or did I forget the way we came? No. I paid close attention, so I could find the way out if I made my escape.

The only room that stayed the same was that of the bone archway. Upon closer inspection, I notice that the veil between the twisted bone is moving. Almost as if it ... breathes. Could it be possible?

Ardwyn nudges me forward before I can study it further, and neither he nor Barlow comment on it as we pass. The way back is full of tense silence. No one speaks. Only the soft sound of our footsteps fills the maze of halls.

At last, we reach our holding chamber. Barlow shoves us through the door. "The next test won't be as simple," he says, and I resist the urge to scoff. He calls that simple?

"Can't wait," I say, snarky as ever.

"Be careful what you wish for, princess," Barlow purrs. "You may find you get more than you bargained for."

With that, he closes the door in our faces, and I turn to Dimitri. My love lets out a breath, his hands trembling. "I wasn't sure if you were going to make it."

"Neither was I," I admit. In the air between us hangs the unspoken knowledge that next time, I might not be so lucky.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Fate

“THEY DIDN’T TELL us when the next ‘test’ would be,” I complain, scratching my shoulder where the Sluagh marked me.

Dimitri says, “Likely on purpose. If they withhold knowledge that can help us, it keeps them in control.”

“You’re probably right.” Groaning, I sink into one of the rickety chairs at our small table and lay my head on my arms. The table’s surface is cool against my skin. “What are we going to do? How are we supposed to escape? It’s times like this I curse my curiosity and wonder what would have happened if I never found that golden tree beneath Father’s castle.”

“That’s the funny thing about fate,” my love muses. “We would have undoubtedly ended up here anyway.”

“How so?” I raise my head and look at him.

“When fate chooses you for a purpose, unless you refuse her entirely, she makes a way to steer you onto her path. You were meant to come to Faerie, and if not by discovering the golden tree in Feristle, then there would have been another way.”

I cannot answer him, but in my silence, I contemplate his words. He sits in the seat across from me and gazes out the barred window. He has to crane his neck to see outside because it’s so high.

“Do you think you and I are a part of fate’s design?” I ask after a while.

A soft smile tugs at his lips. “I hope so.”

I reach for his hand across the table. “Me too.”

* * *

Time passes. I don't know how much, but eventually, our door opens. A young fae woman in servant's garb walks in, carrying a tray of food. It's just bread and water, but my stomach growls in appreciation regardless. After so long on an empty stomach, even goose liver would be welcome. Well, maybe not that. I suppress a shudder.

"Appreciations," I say. "What's your name?"

"Fiorta," she answers, pouring the water into two cups.

"I'm Shay. It's nice to meet you, Fiorta."

The young girl gives me a distrustful look and, after separating the bread onto two plates, retreats from the room. So much for befriending her. I didn't expect getting permission to leave to be that easy, but the failure still stings.

Dimitri and I tear into the bread like ravenous beasts. There wasn't much of it, but it still fills us up. Another form of magic? The water goes down as smoothly as a river in a desert, cooling my parched mouth.

Now that my hunger and thirst are sated, the pull of the Sluagh's magic is stronger. I can feel Dimitri's life force, vibrant and bright, and it's hard to resist tugging on it. I cradle my head in my hands. Hopefully, this doesn't last as long as the blight's magic did.

"What's wrong?" Dim asks.

I shake my head. If I tell him how murderous the stolen power has made me, he'll want to run from me, and there's nowhere for him to go to escape. Plus, I have a feeling the Underfolk feed on fear, so if he ran, I'd only chase him because of how strongly the Sluagh's power courses through me. So, I say nothing, and I bottle it up. Somehow, I must get this under control. Taking a deep breath, I rub my temples.

"Headache?" he asks.

"Something like that." I stand up to pace. Self-control has never been my strong suit, but when Dimitri's life depends on it, the stakes are too high. Raw, gnawing hunger fills me, a hunger not for food. I spare a glance at Dimitri.

He gasps. “Your eyes!”

“My eyes?” My brow furrows. “What’s wrong with them?”

“I thought ... Well, for a moment, I thought they flashed silver. But I don’t see it now.”

Great. What could that mean? With my luck, it could mean a loss of control. I need to figure out a way to release these unwanted powers before they consume me. And they thought my conduit training was complete. Bah!

With the blight horde, the power returned to those it originally belonged to. The blight army held power stolen from Faerie and its inhabitants, so it returned to them. But the Sluagh had its own power. Now that the creature is dead, where will its power go when it leaves me? If I release it, where will I send it?

Again, I’m left with more questions than answers. If there’s one thing I hate to be more than being powerless, it’s ignorant. At least if I’m powerless, knowledge is power. But if I lack knowledge, then I’m doubly useless. It’s not a pleasant feeling.

Dimitri must read my thoughts in my expression because he says, “Hey. We’ll figure this out. You’re not the first conduit, so you can’t be the only one to have ever struggled. When we escape, we’ll do some research.” He strides toward me and cups my chin in his hands. “Listen to me. This is not the end.” He utters each syllable with emphatic assurance.

He’s right. Of course he is. I steady myself, ignoring the dwindling pull of Dimitri’s essence. “Thank you,” I breathe, barely able to get the words out.

“You don’t need to thank me.” He releases my chin and kisses my forehead. “I love you, Shayna. Never forget that.”

* * *

That night, I’m awoken by tiny squeaking. Bleary-eyed, I survey the room, thinking maybe a sprite got in through the window to play tricks on me. Under the table, a mouse is eating the crumbs of our earlier meal.

“Hey, little one,” I whisper. Then I remember my fae-blessed abilities, and I reach out with my mind.

The mouse’s mind is a tangled mess of hunger and caution, but I try to send it thoughts of safety and good intentions. The poor thing is skin and bones. *Would you like me to save you some next time?* I ask it.

The mouse chitters excitedly.

I’ll take that as a yes, I say, an amused smile softening my features. The mouse turns in two full circles then scurries away with a small hunk of bread. I sink back into the bed.

Dimitri hasn’t stirred from his place on the floor beside me. He insisted on taking the floor in front of the bed because he would be the first line of defense to protect me. Normally, I might take offense to that, but in this place? I won’t complain.

The threat of my second test looms over my head. It’s hard, but I manage to go back to sleep. This time, I sleep until dawn.

* * *

Tulio traveled for days to get where he is now. He had to ask the trees for directions to follow the path the princess took because he couldn’t risk revealing himself. Being a hybrid, he can’t turn invisible per se, but he can illusion himself to blend in with his surroundings. It is in this state that he finds himself in Careny.

Slipping in through the gates behind a wagon of soldiers, Tulio meanders through the streets. The city is in turmoil. Armed fae flood the streets like cockroaches, and he sees few ordinary citizens. The plants in pots on the windowsills are gray, as if they were leached of color, and all the grass matches their dreary hues.

If the queen of the fae knew who walked her streets, he would be executed. Tulio smirks to himself. His very existence is forbidden.

Long ago, the fae and elves forbade interspecies breeding because they knew their hybrid offspring could overpower them and—if they so desired—overthrow them. Thankfully

for them, that's not what Tulio came for. Not this time. Although, the idea is tempting.

So, invisible and in secret, Tulio sneaks through Careny and approaches the castle, following the dry, sickly whispers of the dying plants for a hint of the human princess. That is how he wound up in the castle, walking behind two servants with a cart of fae tea.

"They say the queen is beside herself after the Elven ambassador's betrayal. Can you imagine? The visiting princess, stolen away right under her nose!" the older female whispers, excitement coloring her features.

"I wouldn't want to be him right now," the younger one says. "Not when Queen Ash has the relic."

"Hard to believe it's been lost for so long but was nearby all this time," the older one says in an undertone. "My great-grandmother used to tell me stories of the High Queens of old and how they used it. I hardly believed them.... But after seeing the queen use it to fend off the blight horde? I think anything is possible." By the end of her spiel, the older fae's tone is one of awed reverence.

She rambles on about the High Queens while Tulio tries to use context to figure out what a blight horde is. But the conversation turns to other, more meaningless topics before he can gain any understanding. So, he abandons the servants in search of the fae queen.

He finds her in a cozy study, poring over a map on an ornate, wooden desk in front of a stained-glass window. A fae warrior stands in front of her, his sheathed sword glinting in the multicolored sunlight coming in. The sunlight casts the fae queen in radiance, making her appear to glow.

"I've lost sight of them, Sycamore," she says. "They must be with him." She says "him" with such distaste, as if she swallowed a mouthful of rancid eggs.

"If he's involved, she's on her own," the warrior says, his tone much less aggrieved.

“Perhaps.” The queen frowns. “Perhaps not.” She points to two places on the map, and Tulio leans in to see, careful not to get too close. “His influence is strongest from here to here, but this area”—she indicates another spot on the map—“is largely unprotected. What if we sent someone in through there to infiltrate?”

“It’s risky, my queen,” Sycamore says.

“She’s our only hope,” the queen says in answer.

“As you wish.” The warrior bows, placing a fist over his breast. “And have we any news of the horde’s whereabouts? My enforcers have been training the troops you recalled to the city. Soon they will all know our combat maneuvers.”

Queen Ash’s expression turns grim. “After I used the relic, the horde fled north, but there’s been no whisper of them since. It’s as if they’ve vanished.”

Sycamore appears thoughtful as he says, “It’d be hard to hide an army that size. They must be somewhere.”

“Indeed,” remarks the queen. “That they must.”

Tulio still doesn’t know what this horde is, but something that can be considered a threat to the mighty fae seems dangerous. And he now has a general idea of where the lost princess is, but he has no intentions of reporting it to the king. The hybrid smiles, storing the information for later. Then he finds somewhere else to eavesdrop.

* * *

A few minutes after dawn, Fiora brings us more bread, some cheese, and fresh water. I set some aside for my little mouse friend after she leaves. We eat quickly, not knowing when Barlow’s next test will be. It turns out, it’s ten minutes after the food was brought in.

“Control,” Dimitri mouths, referencing our conversation about why they withheld knowledge from us. Apparently, now they want to keep us even more on our toes.

This time, Barlow comes alone to retrieve us. “You know, when Ardwyn reached out to me, claiming to know the

secondborn from the prophecy, I didn't believe him. I laughed at his claims. The letter he sent was signed, 'Ardwyn, Elven Ambassador to Queen Siobhan.' Imagine my shock when his claims turned out to be true!"

The Dark Lord guides us down another hall, his hand on the small of my back. It takes all my strength not to yank it off of me. But he continues, "Do you know what Ardwyn asked for in exchange for your capture?"

"No, but I'm sure you'll tell me," I drawl.

"I love that fire of yours, kitten. Misplaced as it is." The fae smirks. "Ardwyn asked for immunity when everything goes down, freedom to live as he pleases without repercussions. He wanted a share in my power. And he wanted you. I won't grant the last request, of course. See, now you belong to me. But he can have the rest."

I bristle at his implication that I'm one of his possessions.

"Did I tell you how I managed to amass so much power?" the fae asks, an oddly pleased and reminiscent expression on his cruel, handsome face. "I think you can guess. Anyhow, that's where we're headed. You could say it's part of your test." Something unreadable flits across his visage, and then it's gone.

"We've arrived." He pushes open an iron door, revealing a cavernous room. The high ceiling is dome-shaped and made of glass, letting in natural light. The only furniture in the room is a circular mat in the center with a diameter of at least ten yards. And on that mat is a woman who is, at once, a stranger and all too familiar. She's older, but it's the same angular features, albeit a bit sharper. Her hair is darker than I remember, a deep, rich brown. The woman smiles, but it's the smile of a predator, not one of kindness.

"Hello, Sister," says the woman on the mat.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Reunion

SERENA SMILES A cruel, wicked smile. “It’s been a while.”

I’m too shocked to respond. I knew she was alive and with Barlow, but I guess I didn’t fully believe it. Seeing her in the flesh is an entirely different feeling.

“What’s the matter, Shayna? Fae got your tongue?” She laughs, and there’s no joy or mirth in the sound.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Barlow exclaims. “A family reunion!”

Still, I say nothing.

“Aren’t you happy to see me, Sister?” Serena asks. “You used to love me. Or is the love lost between us?”

“What’s happened to you?” My voice comes out as a whisper, but she hears me nonetheless.

“I’ve improved. Do you like the new me?” She does a twirl. As she does, both her black cloak billows and tendrils of black smoke much like blight slink out from her fingertips, wrapping her in a shroud of swirling darkness. She whistles, and all at once, the tendrils recede.

“She’s incredible, isn’t she?” Barlow speaks with a tone of reverence that surprises me. “One of my best creations.”

“Well, she’s ... she’s something for sure,” I manage.

“Shall we see what happens if we pit sister against sister?” An excited gleam enters the fae’s eyes, and my stomach lurches. He wants me to fight Serena? “Get on the mat, both of you.”

Dimitri tenses next to me as an invisible force pushes me forward. I’m unable to keep from stumbling as I resist its persistent nudging. It only ceases once I stand before my older sister.

“Seven years,” I growl. “You’ve been gone for seven years, and this is what you’ve been doing? We mourned for you! Father drinks because of your disappearance.”

“You never came for me, did you?” She circles me on the mat, and I’m forced to turn, so my back isn’t to her. “No matter. I didn’t need you. Barlow has taken excellent care of me. He’s shown me the meaning of true power.”

“At what cost?” I counter. “What does he get out of this?”

Serena lifts her chin, and her upper lip curls in a sneer. “That’s none of your concern.”

“Isn’t it? I had a plan to come back for you, you know. I never forgot.” Can I reason with her? Will she allow that?

“It’s too little, too late, Shayna. I’m happy here.”

I guess the answer is no.

“Enough talk,” barks Barlow. “Begin.”

“Yes, my lord,” Serena purrs. Then she turns to me. “I’m sorry, Sister.”

Suddenly, tendrils of inky black shoot out from her hands and clutch around my throat. Before they can crush my windpipe, I summon my energy shield. Will my powers even work against her with the wards intact? I loosen her magic hold enough to breathe, then I form a bolt and launch it at her.

She easily deflects. “Nice try, Sister, but I’m also fae-blessed, and I’ve had a lot longer to train than you have.”

She also has twisted powers from Barlow, but I don’t acknowledge that out loud. Instead, I change tactics. I bet she hasn’t trained with the elves. Putting all the compulsion I can into my voice, I try persuasion.

“Cease,” I order. The tendrils stop moving.

“Ah, ah,” Barlow tuts. “No cheating.” He snaps his fingers, and Serena has control again. I’m assuming he adjusted the wards.

My sister, knowing her tendrils can’t choke me anymore, wraps them around my head to impair my vision. Being unable

to see places me in a position of weakness, so I must act fast. Pushing upward and out with my energy shield, I dissipate her magic enough to step away from it. Then I circle her again.

“Are you so far gone as to attack your own kin?” I accuse.

“You’re still alive, aren’t you?” She smiles that cold, alien smile again.

“What’s happened to you, Serena?” I repeat, sorrow filling me for the future that could have been.

“I told you, but you refuse to hear. *I’m improved.* Perhaps there is nothing wrong with *me*,” she spits. “Maybe the fault lies with *you*.”

With that, she launches her own bolt of energy, piercing my shield enough to let her tendrils in. Their inky darkness fills the gap in my barrier before I can repair it. The tendrils feel as wrong as my sister’s apathetic behavior.

The magic probes me like a predator studying its prey. Then it strikes. Like a whip, it lashes me, tugging at my own power as if to rip it from me. Before it can fully separate me from my magic, Barlow yells, “Enough!”

Everything stops. As if they were never there, the inky tendrils disappear, and I see only Serena in front of me, a smug smirk on her face. Behind me, Barlow says, “Well done, girls.”

I can’t help the feeling that I did not do well at all. If this was a test, what was he testing me on? If it was on my ability to stand against Serena, then I failed.

I turn to regard Dimitri. His jaw is set in a rigid line, his teeth clenched, and a look of utter helplessness on his face. I know in that moment that he would have helped me here if he could have, that he tried and failed. Most likely, those pesky wards prevented him. I smile in what I hope looks like reassurance, but inwardly, I feel as helpless as he does.

“This test is over, princess. Tomorrow, I have a task for you.” *Lovely.* We need a way out of here. I’ve come to realize Barlow is more dangerous than I feared. If he could corrupt sweet Serena ...

We need to escape.

The Dark Lord leads us back to the holding chamber, where he encourages us to get some rest. Dimitri scowls at his back as the fae shuts our door. Once it clicks shut, he turns to me. “Love? How are you holding up?”

I can’t speak, so I merely shake my head. I’m not okay. How can I be? I found my sister, but she seems beyond hope. All of my dreaming and planning was for naught.

Dimitri crosses the room and takes me in his arms. He rests his chin on my head and smooths my hair. “Shhh. It’s okay.”

That’s when I realize I’m sobbing. “No. Nothing is okay.”

* * *

After night falls, my little mouse returns with some friends. “Well, hello there,” I whisper to the five of them. “I saved you some food.”

Four out of five of the mice chitter excitedly. The other one is wary, so I toss some bread away from me. “It’s okay. I’ll leave it there. You go to it.”

The four scurry to the hunk of barley loaf, while the other, hesitant, approaches with caution. Again, I reach my mind out to my little mouse. At first, I brush against some of the other mice. Their thoughts are similar but also different. Then I find my original visitor. She’s browner than the others and has a white tuft on her chest.

“Do you know much about the castle?” I ask her. She sends me thoughts that are more feelings, but I can make out the affirmative. “What about the labyrinth?” This time, it’s her that’s wary. She stops eating for a moment and squeaks.

“Have you ever been down there?” I whisper, hoping not to wake Dimitri. As I speak, I attempt to bond the mouse. The bond sets in place at the same time that the mouse sends more feelings in the affirmative.

“Do you know what the bone archway is?”

This time, all the mice stop eating. My little mouse's emotions are a jumble of terror, but one thing is clear: a warning not to go near the archway. But if the thing is so evil, can I leave it be without investigating it? If I get the opportunity, I should find out what it is and, if needed, destroy it.

All the mice trembling with fear, they take the barley loaf chunk and flee through a hole in the wall. Then I settle in the lumpy bed, bemused. I'm surprised I can sleep in it at all after the comfortable beds in Feristle, but I got used to sleeping on the hard ground while traveling through Faerie, so this is an improvement.

Dimitri's life essence calls to me as I lie awake, pondering the mice's reaction to mention of the archway. It's hard to resist drawing on it, but if I steal Dimitri's essence, it could kill him. Yet the hunger gnaws at me. If we get out of here, I need to find a way to stop this and prevent it from happening again. No, *when* we get out of here. I refuse to accept any other outcome.

* * *

Ardwyn stands next to Barlow on a cliff overlooking the sea. "Do you think she's ready?" he asks the Dark Lord.

"Oh, she's ready," the fae replies, "whether she knows it or not."

Ardwyn has his doubts. When he brought Shayna here, he didn't expect the Unseelie king to treat her as he has. Granted, he had no expectations, but he still had no wishes for harm to befall the girl. Between throwing her sister at her and the task Barlow has planned for her, harm is sure to come to the little human.

"What will you do if she fails?" Ardwyn asks.

"She won't. She'll succeed, and then I shall claim her for my collection of the gifted." Barlow smiles, deep in thought.

For the first time in a millennium, Ardwyn feels regret. He realizes now that Barlow doesn't intend to let him have

Shayna. He means to keep her for himself. An icy fury burns through him. He's been tricked.

Ardwyn refuses to be taken for a fool. Somehow, he will force Barlow's hand. Then he shall have his desire.

* * *

"Why do you wear that necklace? Where did you get it?" Dimitri asks over our meager dinner. They brought food late in the night this time.

I glance down and frown. Ardwyn's necklace hangs from my neck. How did I forget I was wearing it? I yank it off and throw it down, the clasp breaking in the process. "It was a gift from Ardwyn after the biloduk attack. He said it would protect me from further unpleasant dream encounters."

"The same Ardwyn who betrayed us?" Dimitri looks aghast. "Why in all the realm would you leave it on? It could be cursed!"

"Truth be told, had you not pointed it out, I would have gone on wearing it. Likely to the day of my death. As if by magic, I'd forgotten all about his gift. It was like it didn't exist at all." Puzzled, I stare at the broken chain and pendant on the stone floor. What strange magic can cause memory loss? Can the elves put compulsions on objects? If so, can the fae-blessed? Why didn't Ardwyn mention this?

Probably because he's Ardwyn. He's a betrayer. Why should I expect him to aid me or teach me any more than necessary?

"What should we do with it?" I muse.

Dimitri stoops to pick it up. "Let's hold on to it for the time being. For all we know, it could do as he says. Let us keep it until we can find someone skilled enough to examine it."

"Is that wise?"

"Well, what if it carried a curse? Then we would need someone to examine it anyway. I don't like that it was enchanted to make you forget. What was the purpose in that?"

My love scratches his growing beard. He looks rough and rugged and handsome. It's hard to tear my eyes away.

"I think you're right. Yet another item on our list of problems." I let loose an aggravated sigh. Speaking of curses, the troll on the return trip from the Northern Mountains uttered a curse against me. He said misfortune would follow me, and harm would touch me. He said I'd always feel a shadow at my back. The curse has rung true so far. Not only have misfortune and trouble followed me—I scowl at the thought of Ardwyn and my kidnapping—but I find myself in an unsolvable predicament, with troubles abounding.

"We mustn't lose hope, love. You're resourceful. If anyone can find a way, it's you." Dimitri pulls me into an embrace, wrapping his strong arms around me. "I have faith in you."

"Thanks." A soft smile plays on my lips. "That makes one of us."

* * *

Later that night, my little mouse returns. She comes alone this time. I greet her and hold my hand out to her, then she jumps in my hand. Bringing her up to eye level, I whisper, "You're back. Where are your friends?" The mouse sends images of cowering mice then the bone archway, shuddering at the last image. Understanding dawns on me.

"When I mentioned the archway, it scared them." It comes out as a statement, not a question. The mouse nods. "Do they fear even the mention of it?" She nods again and sends me an image of her cowering. "It was brave of you to come here. You're a little lionheart. That's what I'll call you: Lionheart."

She squeaks, and I set her down, handing her a hunk of bread, which she doesn't hesitate to nibble.

"Brave little mouse, have you seen a human girl slightly older than I am around this fortress?" A tremor runs through Lionheart at the mention of Serena, and she pauses eating. "You know her. Could you keep an eye on her for me?"

Lionheart sends a reluctant agreement through our bond.

“Thank you, brave little mouse. Now I must try to sleep. I’ll get you some more food as soon as I can.”

With one last squeak, Lionheart leaves, taking her remaining bread for her friends. Too tired to ponder our predicament, I lay my heavy head on my pillow and close my eyes. Without delay, I fall asleep, and for the first time since putting on Ardwyn’s necklace, I dream of the Elven queen.

CHAPTER FORTY

Confusing Advice

QUEEN SIOBHAN STANDS in the cave in the Northern Mountains where I lit the candle for the elves. She wears a long, silken dress made of a dark maroon cloth, its hem trimmed in gold and its sleeves dangling from her wrists. Atop her head is a circle of gold leaves, and her long, silvery hair falls in loose, resplendent waves over her shoulders and down her back. Her pale skin has the smooth appearance of porcelain as she stands near the lit candle.

“Shayna! Finally!” the Elven queen says, straightening. Her look of concern steals away her otherwise peaceful features. “I’ve been trying to reach you for weeks but kept encountering interference.”

My first thought is Ardwyn’s compulsion, but why would it fade now if that was the case? Then I remember the necklace I removed tonight, and my eyes narrow. Yet another betrayal by the power-hungry elf. What else is new? “I think I have a theory on why that is, Your Majesty.”

“Spare no time. Tell me now.” The queen steps away from the candle and glides toward me. The light at her back casts her face in deep shadow and makes her dress glow like dying embers.

“First, Your Majesty, do you know anything of what Ardwyn has been up to?”

Siobhan’s brow furrows. “I’m not sure what that has to do with it, but yes. He’s been attending to relations between myself and the young, fae queen.”

“That’s only true if you mean worsening them.” I clasp my hands behind my back. Maybe Queen Siobhan doesn’t know what her ambassador has done.

“Explain.” The elf’s tone is brusque.

I tell her everything, and with each new detail, her face hardens even more. By the time I finish, she wears a mask of

icy rage. Even in her anger, she's beautiful.

"This changes things," she says after several long, tense moments. "I'll need to speak with the others of my kind. Our aid in this war was partially dependent on Queen Ash's acceptance of it. If my ambassador"—she spits the word—"has purposely ruined relations, she may not be as keen to receive our help. The consequences could be disastrous. I have foreseen what will happen if the Unseelie win. It will be an end to the fae realm."

"Your Majesty, does this mean the elves will not come?"

"To tell the truth, I am not sure. This complicates the already complicated debate between our elders. It will at least delay our arrival. At worst, it will stop it." Queen Siobhan gazes out the mouth of the cave at something I cannot see. "You said Ardwyn gave you a necklace after a biloduk attack?"

I nod.

"What have you done with it?"

"My combat trainer, Dimitri, has it for safekeeping, Your Majesty."

"Good," she says. "Keep it in your pocket when you sleep next. I'll place a temporary ward around you to protect you from its effects." She whispers something in an unknown tongue, and the air around me shimmers for a split second. "There. That should guard you. When we meet again, as long as the necklace is on your person, it will come with you. Then I will examine it."

"So, you knew nothing of Ardwyn's doings? You didn't know he'd gone to Barlow?" I ask, needing to confirm it.

"He kept the nature of his actions from me and told me only what would convince me he did my will. He said he was working on relations between our kingdoms and that he was training you, both of which were true ... in a sense. Had I known what he was plotting, retribution would have been swift. But now, I fear, it's too late." The queen's gaze turns distant. "You should rest. I'll visit you soon."

“Yes, Your Majesty.” It brings me comfort to know she had no part in all of this.

As the dream fades, I sink into other, more fitful dreams. When I wake, I feel no more rested than when I lay down. Filling Dimitri in on my encounter, I stick the necklace in my pocket. What I would give for a bath and a change of clothes!

After another meager breakfast, Ardwyn comes alone to collect me. “You will stay here,” he orders Dimitri, who protests. “This task, she must face alone.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him. I’m confident they won’t kill me yet. They still need me for something.

Strangely enough, I feel no pull of Ardwyn’s life essence like I do Dimitri’s. Are elves immune? Or does Ardwyn have no soul? The latter is doubtful.

My love is reluctant, but he lets me leave with the elf, glaring at him as he leads me through the door. Ardwyn places a hand at the small of my back, and I cringe away. He has the audacity to look hurt.

“The Unseelie king has an insurmountable task for you today,” the elf says, choosing to ignore my distaste for him, and I wonder at the title he used. Is he talking about Barlow? He must be. How did a Seelie fae become the king of the Unseelie Court? “I’m not supposed to help you, but if I don’t say something, you are going to fail. It may cost you your life.”

“How kind of you,” I mumble under my breath. His eyes narrow, and I know he heard me. Blasted elf hearing. But he ignores this slight too. Curiosity getting the better of me, I ask, “What does the Unseelie king have planned by the way?”

The elf’s expression turns guarded. “If I tell you that, he’ll know I helped you. I can only give you my advice. Don’t trust anything you see or hear. Trust only what you can smell.”

“Well, thanks, I guess.” His warning only serves to confuse me. How can I not trust what I see or hear? Am I supposed to doubt that Ardwyn stands in front of me? At least

I know he still smells like himself. Geez, I sound like a crazy person with this convoluted way of thinking.

The elf leads me through hall after hall, door after door. I'm hopelessly lost after only five minutes. Then we walk into a hallway of iron, and I lose contact with my powers.

"While the wards and Barlow's ears can't hear us," Ardwyn whispers in my ear, "I'll tell you a secret: destroy its heart, and you weaken the king."

It sounds like a riddle, but before I can ask more, we're out of the iron hall, and he puts a finger to his lips. Silent, we walk down several more halls, then the walls turn to dirt, and a sense of unease makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

"Where are we going?" I ask, but I already know the answer.

"Into the labyrinth."

* * *

Barlow meets us at the entrance. "Welcome to your next task," he says. "I hope you slept well. You'll need your wits about you."

Ardwyn bows at Barlow then gives me an unreadable look. "I shall take my leave."

"Yes, yes," the fae says, waving him away. Ardwyn exits the way we came. "So, princess," the fae continues, "today, I want you to find something for me. Millennia ago, an object was hidden in this labyrinth. I've spent years searching for it—even built my castle atop it in hopes I would find it—but it escapes me. Every time I seek it, the labyrinth prevents me, sending its guardians after me. But you ... you're expendable. Find the object, and I'll let you live. If you don't, the labyrinth will kill you for me."

"Are you going to tell me what the 'object' is?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

"No."

"How does that help me find it?"

“You only need to know that it’s made of stardust.” Barlow opens the final door to the labyrinth. “Now, go. I’ll be here to let you out if you’re successful.” He hands me a torch and shoves me inside, closing the door behind me.

“Okay,” I mutter to myself, “how to find an object that doesn’t want to be found?”

I wander aimlessly through the labyrinth, trying to keep track of the turns I make, but with rooms that shift places once you leave them, it’s impossible. There’s no way I’ll find my way back by memorizing the layout here. So, I trudge on.

Where would one hide an object of stardust?

To my right lies a room full of dusty weapon racks. To my left is a torture chamber. I shudder at the dried bloodstains in that one. Peering in the weapons room, I see that most of the racks are empty, but I enter anyway. There has to be *something* here I can use.

A thick layer of dust covers the floor and all surfaces. It’s so bad that every step I take leaves behind evidence I was here. The air is musty and smells of an animal long dead, and I try—and fail—to hold back a sneeze. The sound echoes too loudly in the close chamber, and the force of the sneeze blows a puff of dust into the air in front of me. I sneeze again.

Waiting to hear the sound of anything coming, I hold my breath. My heart pounds in my chest. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.* When nothing comes, I continue searching the room. All the weapon racks are empty, but tucked away in an unused corner, I find a wooden chest. The lock is old and rusted. It breaks off with a solid kick. Blowing a lock of hair away from my face—and trying not to disturb the dust as I do so—I reach for the chest. The lid creaks as I open it, and I pause to listen again before looking inside.

In the bottom of the chest lies a black dagger, untouched by time or dust. Its steel handle is as shiny as if it was recently polished. I reach for it and touch the edge of the blade, testing to see if it’s dull. With the slightest of touches, the blade pricks my finger, and a small line of blood trickles down the digit. One drop falls to the dirt floor.

Crap. I pick up the blade and cut a strip of cloth from my tunic, wrapping my finger with it. Then I exit the room, black blade in hand. In the light of my torch, it looks like it's made of the same obsidian as the Black Castle.

Somewhere, I hear a groaning, like the walls are shifting, and I pick up my pace. If the labyrinth is sentient, then it probably allowed me to find this dagger. But now it seems to want me to go in circles. No matter where I turn, I end up back at the weapons room. The walls shift again, then I hear footsteps. I'm not alone.

* * *

Tulio has followed the fae queen around for the past day, and he's finally gleaned what the blight horde is. He doesn't, however, know why people weep over the poisoned tree in the courtyard. They say its brown leaves were once pink.

Tulio learned that in six hours, someone named Juniper will leave for someplace called Castle Faraghan with four pegasi, one for him, one for his supplies, and two others. Tulio plans to ride on one of the unburdened horses and find out what else he can. Because if there's anything Tulio knows, it's that nothing is more valuable than information.

The hybrid spends the next hour gathering supplies he can carry invisibly and finding the fae named Juniper. Then he spends the remaining time following him. He watches the armored fae pack a few bags, saddle a bay pegasus, and put his supplies on the red roan pegasus he chose as a pack animal. He also saddles two others without riders. When Juniper isn't looking, Tulio situates himself on one of the extra pegasi. The gelding does little more than nicker.

Soon they leave, the pack animal heavy-laden. Into the sky the pegasi charge, leaving Careny far behind and below them, and they travel without stopping for half a day.

Every so often, Juniper glances behind him to see if the pegasi are keeping up. Each time, Tulio holds his breath, but the fae never finds anything amiss.

So, the five of them continue, passing hills and valleys, flying over a circle of trees, and never once stopping. They fly like death is on their tails.

Tulio feels as if he's on the verge of something great, something that will change everything. The wind in his hair, he leans over his mount and follows Juniper into the unknown.

* * *

Queen Siobhan hates these deliberations. Why can't the elders see that this is right? If Faerie is destroyed in this war, magic itself will vanish from the fae realm, and there will be no land to return to. They will be stuck in this Otherworld if they want to retain their power.

They *must* return. The elders are wasting time by arguing when the answer is already so clear. But it seems it is only clear to her.

A decision of this magnitude cannot be forced. Siobhan can't order her people to uproot their lives here—lives they've stayed in comfortably since the First Great War—to fight a battle they don't believe is theirs. Oh, but it is, though. Faerie's problems will bleed into the Otherworld if they do not act!

The elf queen grits her teeth as one of the elders protests to a reasonable suggestion again. How will they ever make this work? The longer they delay, the closer her vision of destruction comes to being.

Siobhan closes her eyes. Too much is at stake, and Ardwyn has accelerated the sequence of events. Her ambassador lied by omission, and she fell for it. She's grown too lax, and it makes her look foolish. Now the elders, who were so close to agreeing to go to war, are divided again—because of him.

When she gets her claws on Ardwyn, he will see the justice of the elves, a justice they've had an eternity to perfect.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Stench

I HAVEN'T FELT much of an energy drain since consuming the bitterroot, but dread drains me now. The footsteps sound closer, and they're *big*. There is also a scraping sound, like a rake against leaves.

The groan sounds again, and I glance over my shoulder. There's nothing there. Then I feel the whisper of breath on my neck.

There's a stench like an awful, rotting corpse. Oddly, unlike with a normal scent, where one can't discern the direction of the source, I can tell where it's coming from: in front of me and to the left.

I stop breathing, stop moving, and wait.

Behind me, a man speaks, and I jump. "Hello. Are you lost?" he asks.

Turning around, I behold the most magnificent male specimen I've ever seen and will probably ever see. He stands a head and a half taller than me, with hair of a color that could either be blond or brown. He wears nothing but trousers, giving me a full view of his muscled chest, and though his feet are bare, they aren't dirty from treading on this floor. His face is perfect: strong jawline, straight nose, and piercing eyes filled with mischief and knowledge.

"My lady?" he questions when I don't answer, his brow furrowing in concern. His voice is deep and hypnotizing, as pleasant as his face.

Somehow, I find my voice. "Y-yes." Look at me, making a fool of myself in front of a man who looks too good for even this realm. And shame on me for noticing when I'm with Dimitri.

"If you'd like, I can show you the way," the man says, coming closer. "What is it you're here for?"

“Uh...” I say eloquently. He gives me a patient smile, and so help me, his teeth are perfect, too.

“No matter. You seem to have triggered a loop in the labyrinth. I can show you the way out of this repetitive circle.” He holds out his hand, and I take it. His is warm and firm in mine.

The rotten smell circles around behind us as he leads me through a passage in a hidden alcove. I decide to mention it. “What is that stench?”

“Nothing to worry about,” the man says. “The real danger is the labyrinth itself ... and its guardians.” An inscrutable expression crosses the man’s face.

“It smells awful. Did something die?” I wrinkle my nose.

“Oh yes. Many have died here.”

“Where are the bodies?” I’ve seen nothing but dirt and dust down here.

“Picked clean, I’m afraid. The guardians eat all trespassers’ flesh, then they gnaw at their bones. They’re always hungry. That’s how the dead are.” The man stops at a painted door. “Ah, we’re almost there.”

“The guardians are dead?” Now I’m confused. “How do they eat?”

“The labyrinth took the lives of the original eight that created it, and now it uses their bodies for its own purposes. It’s not really the guardians that eat trespassers; the guardians are just an extension of the labyrinth itself. The eyes, ears, and hands of the place. But the bodies of the creators still hold a semblance of their former selves. They still feel the basest of needs: hunger, excitement ... rage.”

“You’re saying they’re angry?” I raise a brow, finding that hard to believe. It’s impossible for the dead to exist beyond the grave.

“The beings that once owned the bodies? No, they’re gone. But the labyrinth gained those emotions from them, and

it uses their bodies to satisfy its cravings.” He inclines his head to the painted door. “Come. It’s through here.”

The smell is worse beyond the door. It’s not even open, and I can hardly bear the stench. My stomach turns. “Are you sure it’s in there?”

“It is. You should go in. The guardians could arrive at any moment.” The man nudges me toward the door, and I turn the handle.

As soon as I see what’s inside I gasp, then I gag at the taste of death that enters my mouth. The air is rancid, and the floor is covered in bones. I look back at the man, but he’s no longer there. Or maybe he is, and I was just seeing an illusion the entire time.

In the man’s place is a rotting corpse, standing on two bony, mottled feet. He looks like one who’s been dead for weeks but smells like he’s been dead much longer. His teeth are yellow and black, and he’s missing an eye. The other one bulges out.

“What’s the matter?” he asks in a voice no longer mesmerizing but raspy. “Don’t like what you see?”

I’m suddenly reminded of Ardwyn’s warning not to trust what I see or hear. He told me to trust what I smell. I really should have listened.

Thankfully, I still carry the black dagger. Will it do any good against something that’s dead? There’s only one way to find out. In one fluid motion, I slash at the guardian’s arm.

The good news is the creature is slow. It was unable to dodge my attack. Half of its arm drops to the floor.

The bad news is, though I did some damage, it doesn’t last. The stub shifts and fizzles, elongating until an arm identical to the one before hangs from his shoulder. It’s as if my strike never fell.

Thinking it may need to be a mortal wound that kills it, I twist and come at the guardian from behind. I slice into its neck. It takes several tries—and a few dodges on my part—to remove its head from its shoulders, but I manage.

He falls to the ground. Triumph fills me ... and then despair as the guardian's neck pops and fizzles. A new head rests there moments later.

“Why ... won't ... you ... die!” I yell between slashes.

The thing laughs, a hollow, breathy sound. “No blade can kill me. I am destruction.”

“Oh yeah? Take this!” On a hunch, I pick up the broken end of the arm bone I sliced off and thrust it up through the guardian's chin. There's a gurgling sound, then a plop as the body falls, and then sweet, blissful silence as he rises no more.

So, the dagger wouldn't permanently harm it, but since it was a part of the labyrinth, it was susceptible to itself. He spoke truly when he called himself destruction.

But where are the other guardians? Just in case, I grab the arm bone, shuddering at the wet, squishy feel of it, and exit the room full of bones. They crunch and clack under my feet as I leave, and I try not to imagine the demise of the ones who came before me.

It's easier to find my way through the labyrinth now. I imagine carrying a piece of the labyrinth itself might be a factor, like having a disturbing good luck charm. But I pass new areas until I get to a room made of mirrors.

The walls, floor, and ceiling are made of the cleanest, most seamless mirrors I've ever seen, and in the center of the room, on a glass pedestal is a violet disk. I know that material; I heard stories of it as a child.

It's unmistakable, and it can only be one thing: stardust.

* * *

“I don't believe it,” I whisper, staring at the stardust disk. My face on the wall opposite me is full of awe, but I can't look away from the treasure before me as I step fully into the room.

Something like this would fetch a fortune for the right buyer, but it'd be dangerous in the wrong hands. Too bad I'm delivering it straight to Barlow.

Didn't Dimitri say this was the only way to take down the wards on the Black Castle? The thought is tempting, but I wouldn't begin to know how to use stardust. It's been two hundred years since the last star fell, and it fell in the fae realm. It's been longer than that since a human has seen it happen. I doubt there's a human alive who knows how to use it.

But maybe ... I'm meeting with Queen Siobhan tonight. Maybe she could tell me. But how would I keep it from Barlow? Tucking my questions away for later, I step up to the pedestal.

Breathe, Shayna. Remember to breathe.

I pick up the disk.

Time slows, and the entire world seems to converge on one point: me. Beneath my feet, the earth trembles, and ripples form in the mirrored glass. My reflection on the wall in front of me glows with a purplish light.

As suddenly as it started, it fades, and I know anything nearby would have felt the eruption of power. Time to leave. I tuck the stardust into my pocket and quickly exit the room of mirrors. The halls I walk begin to look familiar again. I pass through the arena where I fought the Sluagh, and I recognize some turns from my first visit. Soon I see the room with the bone archway. It may be stupid, but I'm too curious to skip checking it out.

The interior of the room is made of hardened clay. It's circular and empty, except for the shimmering veil that seems to breathe between the bone archway. By the light of my torch—which magically didn't extinguish or start a fire when I dropped it during my fight—I can make out strange runes carved into the bone. They're ancient, but they're similar enough to Faerie, so I can read them.

The inscription reads: *In the heart lies deceit*. What was it Ardwyn said? "Destroy its heart, and you weaken the king?" It couldn't be ... Is it possible this is what he meant?

"I am destruction," the guardian had said.

Could I just—

Thudding footsteps sound behind me, and the smell of decay assaults my nose. There's more than one of them by the sound of it. I don't think I can fend off multiple guardians at once, not with only a dagger and a bone for a weapon. Even if I slowed them with the dagger, I could only take out one at a time, and I would surely make a mistake and get injured in the process.

I turn to the archway, looking for a weakness. The only soft spot on it is the veil.

The footsteps get louder behind me, and bile rises in my throat at the horrendous smell. I must be quick. Drawing the arm bone like a sword, I do the only thing I can think of; I stab the veil.

It shudders, and several keening wails rise up behind me. Hazarding a glance, I see six walking corpses wither to dust. They crumple to the floor at the same time that a crack splits the bone archway in two. The veil sputters and winks out. Then a great earthquake shakes the foundations of the labyrinth.

I'm running, leaping over the guardians' bodies like an obstacle course and zigzagging past falling rubble as the very tunnels start to collapse. Fear and desperation to survive propel me faster than I've ever run. Chest heaving and arms pumping, I dash for the exit.

I make it through right before the tunnel collapses. Any slower and I would have been dead. Barlow stands there, mouth gaping, as if he waited there all along to ensure my success.

"You foolish girl," he seethes, eyes wild. "*What have you done?*"

He summons his own inky black tendrils, and without thinking, I shield myself and launch a bolt at him. The mark strikes true; the Dark Lord clutches his side, and I flee.

Does this mean the wards are down? How? I didn't use the stardust. The only thing I touched was the veil of the archway.

Unless the labyrinth powered the wards...

“You’ll pay for this!” Barlow calls to my back.

My chest hurts from all the running, but I can’t stop, even if I don’t know where I’m going. My only thought is escape. Hall after convoluted hall, I run, unseeing. When I bump into someone, I can hardly catch my breath to apologize.

“I should have known,” Serena says, holding me up by the elbows, “that you were behind this. You broke the spell. How did you do it?” She peers into my frenzied eyes.

“The labyrinth...” I pant. “An archway...”

“He’ll be after you. Come. This way.” She pulls me by the arm and leads me down a side passage. “The labyrinth was one of the sources of extra power Barlow used,” she explains as we walk hurriedly. “He used it to mold me and shape me to his will. I overheard him talking about an object in the maze that amplified its power and allowed him to do many things he couldn’t. It’s how he got me to forge and grow his army. He used it to amplify and corrupt my abilities, too.”

“And now?” I ask, still panting. Rubble covers the corridors, and we have to jump over some paces where the floor gave way to the labyrinth below.

“Now I have more control over myself, though I fear that in helping you, there will be retribution.”

“You could come with us, “I say.

Serena shakes her head. “It’s too late for me. I’ve done too much evil to be accepted. I must meet my fate here, for good or for ill. But I will stay and do what I can to give you time. May we meet again.” She pauses. “Tell Father ... tell him I’m sorry.”

Pressing a kiss to my brow, my sister points to a nondescript door. “That’s the exit. I believe your man is outside, causing a disturbance.”

“Thank you,” I say, placing a fist over my heart in a show of respect. I want to argue that she can still come with us, but

something tells me that there's no time to waste. "May we meet again. And on better terms."

I push open the door. Outside, I'm thankful to see the sun and open sky. On the castle grounds, Dimitri launches a ball of light at several guards, who turn to mist. The rest are wary, opting to keep their distance. He sees me and smiles. "The wards are down!" he calls.

"I noticed," I call back. Then I shout, "Behind you!" when a guard tries to sneak up on him.

He shoots a fireball over his shoulder, but while he's distracted, he takes an arrow to the gut. I stop breathing. Wounded, Dimitri continues to fight, throwing ball after ball at his opponents, but he's too pale.

"I'll cover you," Serena yells from behind me, apparently having stayed behind, and I rush out to my love.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Bite This

DIMITRI KEEPS FIGHTING, but it's obvious he's losing strength. His breathing is labored, and he grunts in pain with most movements. He's not looking good.

Above, four shapes come into view. *Great.* Now we'll have to fight against an aerial assault, too?

Serena shoots tendrils through one fae's throat, while she uses them to strangle another fae. "Go! Get him out of here!"

I pull Dimitri with me as my sister makes a gap in the enemy lines. The four figures in the sky swoop and swerve in our direction, following us. Are those *wings*?

As they near us, I can make out four pegasi. So help me, if that's Ardwyn, I don't know what I'll do.

We make it to the city gates; but the guards are lowering the portcullis. "Come on!" I yell to Dimitri. "We need to be faster!"

"I'm ... trying," he gasps.

"Just a little further...."

We make it through! But the pegasi are close on our tails. We can't outrun them, especially not with Dimitri in the state he's in.

The pegasi land, and a tall, armor-clad fae dismounts the lead pegasus. He strides forward, and I raise my black dagger. "Stay back!"

Dimitri can barely stand. There's no way he can fight, so I'll have to protect him.

The fae raises his hands in a gesture of calm. "Princess, it's me, Juniper." My dagger trembles slightly as I lower it. "There's no time. We need to ride." He turns to Dimitri. "Will you be able to stay on?"

"I'll manage," says my love.

Juniper has to help him on the horse, but soon, we're off. The Black Castle is in chaos beneath us as it fades into the distance. We ride for thirty minutes before stopping to tend to Dimitri.

The fae lays a bedroll out, and my love grunts as we help lower him onto it. "This wound is serious," Juniper says. "It nicked one of his organs. I can try to remove it, but it might cause more damage. Leaving it in is an even greater risk because movement can exacerbate the wound."

"Do it," Dimitri says. His every breath is a painful gasp.

"Here. Bite this." The fae hands him a strip of leather.

My love obliges, and Juniper breaks off the end of the shaft. "We'll have to finish pushing it through. I'm sorry."

Without warning, the fae shoves the arrow with one hand and pulls the other end. I cringe at the sound of Dimitri's screams. Blood spurts from the wound then stops. Why did it stop? Tears fill my eyes and I look away.

"I've never seen anything like it," Juniper marvels.

"Like what?" I still can't look. Tears flow freely down my face. Dimitri *can't* be dead.

"Shayna," comes the voice of my love. "Shayna, look at me."

"I can't bear to see you like this," I whisper. *Not dead*, I tell myself. *Not dead*.

"Look at me, love," he says again.

With one eye open, I peek at him. He's no longer pale, and though he's covered in blood, there is no wound. I can't process what I am seeing.

"How?" I breathe.

"It's rare," says the fae, "but there have been cases of certain fae-blessed with regenerative healing capabilities."

I can't breathe. "You're okay!"

"I'm okay," my love confirms.

Juniper stands. “We should keep moving. It’s a long way back to Careny, and I’m not convinced Barlow’s men won’t follow us.”

“Right. Okay,” I say, still reeling.

“That means getting on the pegasus, Shay.” Dimitri smiles, eyes twinkling in amusement.

“Got it.” I numbly mount my pegasus, and we continue on our way. “Dimitri?”

He looks over at me from the back of his steed. “Yes, love?”

“Don’t scare me like that again.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

* * *

Tulio doesn’t know how he got so far from his goal, but he’s not complaining. Not when he sees an angel. Clothed in tendrils of darkest night, she fights guards wearing the same colors she does in front of an obsidian fortress.

She’s glorious.

More beautiful than the stars and infinitely more deadly. Tulio is in love. The way she moves, the way she fights...

To his dismay, a dark-haired fae enters the courtyard and orders the guards to surround her. One of them slaps iron cuffs and an iron collar around her. Then they lead her away.

Tulio follows.

* * *

We stop to rest halfway through the night. I’m thoroughly exhausted after all the running and fighting, so slipping into sleep is easy. When I do, as promised, Siobhan meets me in my dreams.

“Shayna,” she says. “You made it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It’s been an eventful day.”

“Tell me all about it, but first, did you bring the necklace?”

I reach into my pocket and pull it out. Then I hand it over to the Elven queen.

“As I thought,” she hums.

“What is it?”

“It’s cursed. It kept you from dreaming, yes, but it also placed in you a seed of obedience tuned to Ardwyn alone. Should he choose, my former ambassador could ask you to do anything, and you’d be forced to obey.”

Concern ripples through me but also confusion. “Why would he do that when he could compel me to obey?”

“Persuasion has unpleasant effects in the long-term. Didn’t Ardwyn cover that in your training?”

“He may have mentioned it.” He did, but it wasn’t during training; it was after he betrayed me. “There is something else I need to talk to you about.”

“Speak,” the queen says in a voice only one used to being obeyed can master.

“What do you know of stardust?” I ask.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything,” I whisper.

Queen Siobhan tells me all about how stardust works. “Like most ancient magics, stardust takes little effort. If you will it, it will happen. The only limits are within the confines of your imagination.”

“But how does one use it?” I ask.

“One need only touch it to wield its power,” she says matter-of-factly. “The simplicity of its use has caused many a magician to make mistakes. In the heat of anger, those who wore it were often met with deadly consequences. It’s powerful enough to level cities.”

“You mean I could have used the stardust all along? If I’d known that, I could have defeated Barlow before we fled! Instead, he lives, and now he has time to regroup.”

“Fret not, princess. It was not yet his time. The Unseelie king, I believe, still has a role to play before all of this is over.” Queen Siobhan hands me back Ardwyn’s dream necklace. “You’ll need to find a way to remove the curse my former ambassador placed upon you. Unfortunately, undoing a curse is not so simple as using stardust, and I think he knew that. Curses have existed since the dawn of time. They’re older than the stars and therefore untouchable by them. Let me ponder this and get back to you.”

The Elven queen bids me farewell, and the meeting ends, leaving me in dreams full of Barlow’s cold laughter and Ardwyn commanding me to dance until my legs fall off. When I wake, the sun peeks over the horizon, casting our camp in a morning glow.

“You’re up,” Juniper says. “I thought you might want this.” He hands me Wraithbane, my bow, and I clutch it to myself.

“Thanks,” I whisper. “I wasn’t sure I’d ever see this again.”

Juniper nods. “Do you know the blade you carry?” He gestures to my black dagger, which I’ve strapped to my thigh until I can get a sheath.

“No, do you?”

“That’s Nightstalker, the weapon of the former Unseelie king, Orion. There is much innocent blood shed under the weight of that blade.”

“Who was Orion?” I glance down at the black dagger, suddenly wary. Why did the labyrinth allow me to find it?

“A mighty but terrible king. He murdered thousands of fae, men, women, and children alike. All who would not bow to him were cut down before Nightstalker and its ivory companion, Ghostfiend. He chose daggers because he liked to be close enough to watch the light leave someone’s eyes when he killed them. No one has seen either blade for centuries. Until now, that is.”

I'm not sure how comfortable I am, carrying a weapon with such a bloody history, but somehow, I don't think it wise to pass Nightstalker on to anyone else. "What happened to Orion?"

"Disappeared. He's rumored to be dead or imprisoned, but no one knows for sure." Juniper lights a pipe packed with bristle leaf.

An ominous feeling overtakes me. Something doesn't bode well about all of this. Beside me, Dimitri stirs in his sleep.

But Juniper continues, "After breakfast, we'll need to be moving, princess. It's a long way to Careny, and we're still needed there. The city is in upheaval after the Evalis Tree's poisoning."

Dread fills me. "The tree that balances good and evil?"

"The very same," he affirms.

"What happened to it?" I ask. My suspicions turn to Ardwyn, who gave me a history lesson on the pink-blossomed tree in the inner courtyard at Careny.

"Someone poured a poison over its roots, but since the roots soaked it up, we can't determine what was in it. So, we haven't been able to create an antidote."

My thoughts turn inward. If the magic that balances good and evil is at risk, then making war against Barlow and the Unseelie just became a little more unpredictable. "What will we do?"

"No one knows. Nothing like this has happened in all of time." The enforcer takes a puff of bristle leaf. "The only surety is that we're already seeing the effects."

Dimitri opens his eyes, squinting and rubbing them. There's still no sign of his mortal wound. "Hey," he says.

"Hey yourself." I smile at him. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I just woke up," he replies, smiling back sleepily.

“That you did. We need to go soon, so are you ready for breakfast?”

He nods, stretching and yawning, and we eat some *spatkis*. It reminds me of our journey to Faerie with Spruce and Amaryllis. So much has happened since then. So much has changed.... *I've* changed.

I'm no longer the ignorant girl I was before all of this. Now I'm a woman. A warrior. I am the secondborn.

This time, I believe it. This time, I know I can conquer whatever I face. And with Dimitri at my side, I'm unstoppable.

I don't fear what is to come; I relish it. My enemies will fall at my feet, and I will overcome every obstacle.

Because I'm Shayna De Marco, princess of Feristle, daughter of King Frederick, sister of Serena and Philip, and savior of Faerie.

I am no longer afraid.

EPILOGUE

ARDWYN SMILES AS he watches Barlow's city burn. Metaphorically, of course. He's glad Shayna survived and understood his warning. That will make it easier to use her. You can't use someone if they're dead.

Barlow wanted Ardwyn's little human for himself, but if Ardwyn can't have her, no one can.

He'll let Shayna flee for now, but he will come for her. There is no escape. She *will* be his. He'll make sure of it.

Eventually, Barlow may figure out he had a hand in this, so it's time for Ardwyn to flee, too. He still believes in the world the Dark Lord envisions, but there are multiple ways to accomplish the same goal. So, Ardwyn fastens the pack on his second pegasus, mounts the first, and follows Shayna's group at a distance.

No one escapes him. She won't be the first.

THANK YOU FOR READING!

I HOPE YOU enjoyed *Blessed by the Fae*, the first book in the Fae-blessed series. I'm working hard to get book two out, but until then, if you're in the United States, you can read it as it's being written on Kindle Vella. Simply use the following link and navigate to Episode 85.

<https://www.amazon.com/kindle-vella/episode/B0CW1J6JHN>

If you want to check out my other works, here's an excerpt from the Chronicles of Natasha LaRue series, an urban fantasy you can find at this link:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C7LMLHJZ>

JADA MCCRARY



Imagine waking up on a cold, hard floor, naked and covered in blood. Hold that image for a second. Good. Now imagine all that, plus a 350-pound hellhound standing over you, growling and drooling on your face.

I bet you're wondering how I got here. Well, so am I. But I don't remember anything, not even my name.

I peer around my dirty surroundings, trying to get my bearings. I lie on a filthy mattress, the springs worn out and pushing into my back. My red hair is gnarled and splayed out behind me, while caked mud and dried blood covers my olive-toned skin. There are scabbing cuts on my legs and feet, as if I had been running through a briar patch barefoot.

The walls are made of large, faded bricks, and a single lightbulb hangs from the ceiling, flickering and about to go out. What appears to be a camera dangles from the far corner of the ceiling. The hellhound blocks the white metal door, which has a keypad and looks to be the most modern thing in the room.

Time passes so slowly.

After what feels like hours, I hear voices outside the door. They both sound male, and whatever they're arguing about is getting heated.

"She isn't ready," one says. He has a wheezy and nasal voice. "She's only just woken up."

"We must interrogate her now," the other argues. "Time is short."

The second voice is smooth, like water lapping over a sandy shore. It seems almost deceptively serene. I can almost imagine the power behind the man it belongs to.

Soon a series of beeps sound off on what must be the keypad on the other side, and the door clicks. One set of footsteps recedes, and a tall, striking man enters my cell.

He carries himself like someone who holds all the power in the world, and his short, jet-black hair and ice-white skin contrast like night and day. Three lines of a scar run from his hairline to the corner of his mouth on the right side of his face. His eyes are gray and look dead, holding no emotion whatsoever. He throws me a long crimson dress with a V-neckline and a black dahlia on the ruffled skirt.

"Put this on," his smooth voice says. He must be the one who wanted to interrogate me.

He does not turn around while I dress but watches me with his cold, dead eyes. I raise my chin defiantly as he strokes the hellhound and stares at me. Whatever this man's game is, I need to figure it out quick. He doesn't seem human, and it's unnatural.

The hellhound settles down with him near, its glare less menacing. For that, I am grateful. When I am dressed, I notice the ball gown is much fancier on me than it had appeared at first glance. All this show for a dismal place such as this.

"Natasha LaRue," he begins. That must be my name. "My name is Sloan Kilroy. That is all the time I will spend on pleasantries. Now, where is the amulet?"

What is he talking about? I stare at him, confused.

"I can see you are going to make this difficult," the man says. "What did you do with the amulet when you were in the Mojave Desert?"

"I don't know anything about an amulet, dude," I finally say. I won't tell him I don't remember anything; there's no telling what he will do if he finds that out.

"Alright," he says. "The hard way it is."

He charges at me, and suddenly, I find myself lifted in the air, my airways constricting as his hand closes around my throat. My eyes bulge, and I can feel my face turning red. Yep. He's definitely not human. No human could be this strong.

I don't know what he's playing at, but it's just making me angrier. I glower at him. If this is how he plans to interrogate, he won't get anywhere with me.

Sloan Kilroy jerks his hand, and I fly through the air. I stop when I hit one of the brick walls. My head jarred, I blink slowly and turn to scowl at him. I think I read about this kind of thing once. It was called superstrength, wasn't it? Either way, it's the stuff of faerie tales.

What is going on?

"Natasha LaRue, you *will* tell me where it is, one way or another. I always get my answer." Abruptly, he turns, types

some numbers in that keypad, and walks out the door, leaving me alone with the hellhound.

How am I going to get out of here? What is this amulet he asked me about? Ohhh, my head! Maybe a little sleep would help. I cannot stay awake, so I crawl back to the lumpy mattress to lie down and close my eyes.



Soon I find myself in a dream. I'm back in the cell with the hellhound, but I'm not all here. The hellhound snores, loud as a banshee. My body is translucent, and I can see clearly in the dimly lit cell. I go to push against the mattress and sit up, only for my hand to go right through!

Well, this is interesting. I wonder what else I can do in this dream. I push against the floor and stand up. My hand did not go through the floor, so maybe it's just objects that I can go through in this dream.

I stand up and walk to the door. Trying to push on it, my hand disappears up to my wrist. Testing a theory, I try to walk through it. It works. On the other side is a bright-white hallway that looks like a hospital or prison. A clock on the far end of the wall reads 3:08. There is just one guard outside the door, but he does not appear to see me.

I look left, then right, unsure of which way to go. To the left is a hall full of doors, but to the right is a poorly lit hallway with just one door at the end, which reads: RADIATION. I'm definitely not going down there. Hall of doors, it is.

What a curious dream this is. Not that I have any memories to compare this to, but it feels so real.

Suddenly, alarms sound, and I hear multiple footsteps pounding on the VCT floors. Even if this is a dream, I don't want to get caught. I walk through one of the many doors and try to hide.

The first thing I notice is the smell. It smells like a field or a garden. The strength of it burns my nostrils. I see a bunch of jars full of herbs and artifacts on dozens of shelves. Books lay

across tables, some open as if their readers had only stepped away from them for a moment, intending to come back and devour them. I step over to one and browse the open page.

The properties of magical artifacts are diverse, it reads. They can have abilities that perform a variety of functions. They range from as little as making someone tell the truth to as large as mind control and various sorts of destruction. Most usually come in the form of jewelry items, such as rings and necklaces.

I look at some of the things in the jars. I recognize a few of them, like rosemary, lavender, and basil. Some look like insects, but others are unidentifiable. As I'm inspecting these oddities, I hear quick, thudding footsteps outside the door.

"... not in the cell," one voice says, while another frantically mutters the word "disappeared."

This feels too real. I suspect I may not be dreaming. Somehow, I must find a way out of here. Even if it appears they can't see me, I don't want to press my luck. I move through the wall instead of the door and find myself in another room.

This one is just a room of lab tables and chairs. Moving into the next room, I can see an escape door, which is where I make a run for it.

The escape door leads out to a hot, barren scene, and I know I'm in a desert. The blistering sun beats down without mercy. A chain-link fence surrounds the compound I've just left, and men in dark clothing bustle about in a panic. None of them glance my way or see me as I run past them.

Soon I'm sprinting down the dusty drive and out to a deserted main road. My bare feet burn on the scorching sand, my lungs heaving with the effort of my exertion. I've escaped, but I'm no closer to safety. With no idea who I am or where I've come from, I don't know where to go either. My only clues are the name by which Sloan called me and the Mojave Desert he mentioned. If that's where I've been, then perhaps it may hold the key to my past.

For now, I'll keep walking. Hopefully, I will find civilization and be able to ask for directions. With no clue where I'm going and no idea who I am, it's gonna be a race against time to keep from getting caught. But I'm ready.



It's probably near sunset when the road I've been following leads to what could be the outskirts of a town coming into view. Maybe there will be someone there who can tell me where I am. I've been walking for what feels like ages, and my bare feet *hurt*. I can feel how raw, burnt, and bloodied they are, but I'm too afraid to look at the damage.

I'm sure I look conspicuous in this fancy dress, but I'd look even more conspicuous in nothing, like how I woke up. I laugh humorlessly at the thought. At least it's long enough to cover up the cuts on my legs, and if I pull it down enough, it will cover my feet. I hope.

I walk purposefully to a lit-up gas station, trying to act nonchalant and grimacing as I try and fail at hiding my limp. The teenage clerk, who is probably no older than nineteen, looks up from behind the counter when the door opens, but his gaze looks beyond me. Crap. I may still be invisible. I hide in an aisle and try to determine how to undo whatever I've done to make myself unseen.

Be visible, I tell myself. Hoping it worked, I step out from the aisle and walk up to the clerk. He makes eye contact and smiles. The pimples on his face are very noticeable in this lighting, but otherwise, he has strong features. I put on a warm smile in return, breathing out a quiet sigh of relief.

"What can I do for a pretty young lady like yourself?" the clerk asks, eyeing me up and down, a lustful gleam in his eye.

Trying not to sound suspicious and putting on a smile to appear more friendly, I say, "Well, uh, I was traveling, and I seem to have gotten lost. Can you tell me what city this is?" Geez, what a lame excuse.

"Why, you're in Boulder City, Nevada," the clerk replies, not picking up on how outlandish it is for a woman in a ball

gown to be “traveling” anywhere.

“Okay, thanks.” I turn to leave before he becomes suspicious about me not having a vehicle.

As I open the door, another man walks in, smelling of stale sweat. He walks up to the clerk, slaps a twenty on the counter, and grunts, “A pack of reds.”

I notice that the man inside has left his car running in his parking spot while he pays. Guiltily, I look around. I may not know who I am, but I know I am not a thief. Still, I need a way to get around this area and search for clues about the amulet Sloan mentioned.

I don't have long to decide before I'm stuck here, so I quickly get in the driver's seat. I vaguely remember how to use one of these, but don't ask me how I do. It's a tan compact car that looks almost brand new, but it smells like cigarettes.

I take off before the man can come back out, too afraid to look back.



I've probably gone ten miles, past lots of dry wastelands, when I first hear the sirens. Coming to a hilly area, I pull off and park out of sight to wait for them to pass. I turn off my headlights and hope not to be seen.

One, no, two police cars pass me, not slowing. I exhale the breath I was holding. I need to get out of this city and ditch this car. When in doubt, go north.

I look around inside the vehicle for any supplies and find a flashlight on the passenger floorboard and a granola bar in the center console.

Opening the glove box, I find a pair of sunglasses and a map of the area. I pick a random city to the north of Boulder City. Las Vegas, it is. With destination in mind, I pull back onto the road.

I'm going to need funds if I'm going to survive. I may need to get used to stealing, at least for the time being.

Who was I before this? How did I come to be in that cell? And the question I've been asking myself since Sloan used those strange powers on me: what is this amulet he mentioned? More importantly, how did I walk through walls like that? And what else can I do?

I have all this to ponder as I drive toward Las Vegas. I make a plan to stop by a busy place and try to pickpocket a wallet, so I can buy some clothes that aren't so ... conspicuous. And shoes. I'll need shoes.

The sun has long since set, and the clock says it's 9:30 p.m. when I pull into a half-full Walmart parking lot. I'll sleep in this car and figure out my target in the morning.

As my stomach rumbles, I settle into my uncomfortable seat. It's going to be a long night.



I think I'm dreaming again when I open my eyes, or am I sleepwalking? My body is translucent once more as I sink through the seat of the car. Slowly, I get out and assess my surroundings. Walmart appears to be closing. There are a few people leaving the store and walking to their vehicles. This may be an opportune time attempt to steal a wallet. They probably wouldn't even see me if last time tells me anything.

I tiptoe up to an overweight man with a toupee. He is staring at his phone as he walks to his Mercedes. While he's distracted by fumbling for his keys, I reach for his pocket. My fingers go right through and stop at his leg. Thankfully, I shudder at the thought of my fingers being inside the man's body.

The man shakes his leg as if it tickles. His wallet is not in this pocket. Grumbling under my breath, I try the other one. *Success!*

Sighing, I go back to my stolen car and hesitate. How can I get back in? I am not sure how this power works, but perhaps I can will myself not to fall through the seat. I try what I tried in the gas station, just willing it to happen, and it works.

Hey, I'm starting to get the hang of this.

Now, to check my results. I open the wallet and find six hundred dollars in cash, an American Express Gold Card, and a shiny bank card. I feel that now familiar twinge of guilt as I thank the heavens for sweet triumph. Maybe I can get some actual food and sleep in a bed for a change. I'll keep driving a bit until I get closer to Las Vegas. Then I'll stop at a motel to rest.

Willing myself fully substantial, I turn the car on and drive for a few hours. Finally, when my energy dwindles, I stop at a fancy motel. It has a clean exterior and bright lampposts. Neatly trimmed hedges neatly line the front of all the buildings, and in the center of the square of buildings is a saltwater pool that looks sublime. A sign hangs from the door of the smallest building that says OFFICE. That's where I enter.

The woman behind the desk looks up at me. She has shiny, straight black hair and a slim figure. Her skin is like bronze, and she looks to be in her thirties. Seeing no one behind me, she says, "Room for one?"

I nod.

"One hundred dollars a night. And how many nights will you be staying?" The woman stares at me with wariness, probably because of what I'm wearing.

I don't want to stay in one place too long but also don't know where to go from here. "Two?" I mean it as a statement, but it comes out as a question.

"Very well," she says. "Two hundred dollars, then."

I reach into the wallet I procured and pull out \$200. She takes the money quickly and examines it as if to see if it is counterfeit. Satisfied with what she sees, she hands me a key. "Suite 12," she says. "Last one on the row."

I thank her and leave, knowing I'll need to buy new clothes in the morning. Then I turn the key to open my suite and look around. The bed is a full size with a navy-blue comforter. The curtains are cream, and the carpet looks like it

used to be beige. There is a clock on the nightstand that reads 5:49 a.m.

I get into the bed, silently wishing not to have another episode where I sink to the floor. Then I close my eyes, the events of the past twenty-four hours catching up to me. Soon enough, I fall into sleep, and when I wake just after dawn, it isn't the phasing through furniture that stirs me; it's a knock on the door.

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JADA MCCRARY IS an author who writes fantasy and other genres. When her nose isn't in a book or writing her own, she can be found on horseback or at a museum. She enjoys looking at all art, discriminating against none.

Her two kids and husband take up most of her life, and it brings her great joy to turn writing into a career and give her more time to spend with them.

While she didn't include many aspects of real-life religion in this series, her Christianity is one of the biggest aspects of her life.

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