

THE SHATTERED TALES



A PRINCESS AND THE PEA RETELLING

To DECEIVE A
KINGDOM

KATHRYN RADAKER

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To the man who has always preferred to go without public acknowledgement and who is allergic to the spotlight, thank you for being my biggest cheerleader and always believing in me more than I believe in myself.

Chapter 1

The Betrayal



Ceris

To this day, I'm still not sure how Evla talked me into such an absurd scheme. And I'm utterly baffled how we pulled it off for so long. I mean, as a career criminal, I've arranged my fair share of illegal plots—successful ones, I might add—but Evla's wasn't even well-planned. It should've crashed and burned at the start.

When she cornered me in the stable with that exquisite gown in her arms, her fine Fae features perfectly serene, her dark golden hair in a braided crown, I should've shut her down right then before she could even say, "Ceris, my dear girl, I'd like to hire you for a quick job."

But I didn't. Instead, I pushed my dark brown waves out of my eyes—suddenly feeling unkempt next to my royal visitor—and asked, "What does it pay?"

And even though that mistake came back to haunt me, I can't quite bring myself to regret it.

"Only moderately," she admitted with a shrug that was more elegant than any shrug had a right to be. As the Queen's cousin from the faraway kingdom of Veldyr, she was not only a member of the royal family, but also of a higher pedigree of

Fae. “But it’s such a short, simple task, it’ll be the easiest *aethlin* you’ve ever made.”

Despite the tempting sum, I had to feign disinterest. Instead, I focused on brushing out the inky black mane of the kelpie before me as though I received all my truest and deepest meaning in life from my day job as a horse trainer’s assistant. (And by “horse,” I mean both those kinds native to the human realm and a variety of Fae equine breeds.) After all, Cledfyr’s owner would be arriving soon to inspect his progress, and we wanted to put forth our very best impression.

“You see,” Evla continued, “I’m afraid I’ve overbooked myself. I made an appointment to purchase a contraband wine down at the royal harbor at the same time I’m supposed to be greeting Princess Iloma of Searon. I need you to impersonate me, visit the cove just north of the harbor, and meet the wine smuggler.”

I glanced away from a stubborn knot in the kelpie’s mane to narrow my eyes at her. “You made an appointment to buy contraband wine at the *royal harbor*? A place which is crawling with soldiers?”

Evla waved a dismissive hand. “Not *technically* at the harbor. At the cove just to the north of the harbor. There’s only one guard who patrols that far, and I already paid him off rather handsomely to avoid that area tonight. Even with your weakened blood, you Lianthirans are still Fae enough to never turn down a generous bribe.”

If it weren’t for the fact that Evla was my closest non-criminal friend in the world, I would’ve cursed her with pig hooves right then and there for making such a jab at our inferior bloodline. However, I moved on to my second objection to her plan. “Be that as it may, I am not a smuggler

of luxuries, Evla. I traffic medicine. You know, the stuff that keeps illness and curses at bay.”

Evla’s regal expression didn’t change, but her slight pause before responding spoke volumes. “I understand that, but the truth remains that you *are* a smuggler. I can think of no one else who could pull off such a deception, so I was hoping you might make an exception for a friend? If it makes a difference, I could perhaps increase your pay a bit?”

Evla knew that’s what I was angling for. She also knew that I knew that she knew. We both knew the dance passed down from our trickster ancestors. No matter how much human blood I had in me, the Fae portion would win in the end, and I would demand a favorable price for my shadowy services, even from a friend. She was nearly thirty years older than I, and a royal; she could afford it.

I finally set the mane brush back in the grooming kit and turned my critical eye upon Evla. She happened to be standing in the exact spot where she’d stood when we first met a few short years earlier. She’d come to purchase a pegasus, and the odd juxtaposition of her refined appearance and manners against her crass language when the pegasus snubbed her had amused me enough to decide I needed to adopt a pet royal.

As the golden rays of the afternoon sunlight bounced off the dusty air and surrounded her like a shimmering halo, everything about Evla seemed delicate. Her poise and graceful movements were majestic enough to rival the Queen herself. Her ears were as perfectly slender as you’d expect from a pure-blood Fae, and her features were fine and sharp as though carved from marble, or perhaps quartz.

Then again, it probably wasn’t fair to compare my Lianthir-born neighbors to Evla. Most of us didn’t have

enough magic left to squander on trivial things like glamour while Evla did, and she *definitely* used it. Despite our age difference, she looked around the same age as my twenty-four years, maybe even a little bit younger.

And yet here was the royal cousin, in our weak-magicked stable, asking for “alternative services” one wouldn’t normally find in such humble surroundings. At least unlike the first time she was here, Evla wasn’t staring down our non-Fae horses as though unimpressed by them, but too well-bred to say so.

“Make it two *aethline*, and I’ll deliver the wine to your suite before you’re done exchanging niceties with the foreign princess,” I conceded.

I started to hold my arms out for the gown, but after seeing all the kelpie hair on my faded blue work dress, I put my arms down and instead twisted to look at the pile of freshly laundered rub rags. I grabbed the biggest one I could find and draped it over an empty blanket bar. With a delicate sigh and a reproachful look at me, Evla draped the gown over the covered bar.

She turned back to me and grasped my outstretched hand, despite its grittiness. “Your friendship honors me, Ceris of Moonshade Glen. I accept the arrangement and declare a fair trade,” she said solemnly, satisfying the Fae rules of exchange and causing a light sizzle of magic to spark between us and evaporate in a fine mist. Even so, her eyes were warm and full of more humor than was proper as she released my hand.

As a finishing touch, Evla reached into a small satchel and pulled out a tiny pouch of deep blue velvet. She handed it over to me with a sparkle in her eyes. “I’ll even let you borrow my new wings for the occasion.”

I allowed myself permission to give my friend a smile of delight. Although wings were common enough among the other Fae nations, as magic had begun to fade in Lianthir, wingmakers were becoming more and more rare. Therefore, wings had morphed into a status symbol among the wealthiest and most powerful in the Kingdom of Lianthir. Despite the number of disguises I've worn during my assignments as a smuggler, this would only be my third or fourth time trying on wings.

“Well, well, won't I be fancy?” I said, my fingers greedily feeling the velvet. I couldn't wait to see what the wings looked like when the charm touched my skin, but the stable was the wrong place to test them out. “But you're not even wearing wings today. Would the wine smuggler be expecting to see you in wings during an illicit exchange?”

“Probably not,” Evla admitted. “But there's a hidden pocket on the left side of the bodice, right where it meets the skirt. You should at least take the wings with you, just in case you find you need to really sell your cover.”

Ah, yes. Spending time with me has brought out the best in Evla, I thought with pride.

“I should really get going now,” Evla said, brushing tiny bits of hay and dried seaweed from her gown. “I can't afford to draw attention to my visits here. But I look forward to you fulfilling your side of our bargain.”

I know it sounds odd for a horse trainer's assistant/medicinal smuggler to be friends with the Queen's elegant flower of a cousin. I imagine that in any other kingdom—Fae or otherwise—our differences in age and station would have proved to be barriers to any sort of relationship. But after the collapse of the portal and the death

of the previous king, social lines got a little blurry. The Lianthir Fae had to band together to work whatever strengths we had to our advantage.

My strength just so happens to be guile. Fortunately for me, that's still a deeply-appreciated value around here, even after our community was tainted by humanity. Sure, having the only active portal to the human realm for a couple centuries gave us quite the economic edge over the other kingdoms, but it had come at the steep cost of our magic and culture as our people had taken on human spouses and customs.

We'd always had traces of human blood mixed into our race. Portals used to be more common centuries ago, and nearly every nation had one. Intermarriage was less common back then as the hostility between our races was higher, but our ancestors' grotesque practice of stealing human babies to raise as their own and replacing them with changelings had introduced human blood among the Fae as far back as we had records.

But as more and more portals were closed—either voluntarily or by various disasters like ours—and Fae and human relations improved, mixed-race marriages became more acceptable and were concentrated near portals. And for the last couple of centuries, the last remaining portal had been located here in Lianthir. Until just like all the others, it was snuffed out as well.

Immediately after Evla's abrupt departure, I decided to go ahead and grant myself a special treat, an early dinner at my favorite food stand in the marketplace. I was fortunate enough that Emesyl, my boss, kept me on a *very* loose lead rope. (There are a lot of perks to being his best smuggler.)

I was practically skipping with glee when I approached Alfonso's stand and called out a greeting to the cheery silver-haired chef. He grinned back and simply asked, "Your regular, Ceris? Iron-free, right?"

Alfonso and his wife Kimberly were part of the human population who had been caught on the Fae side when the portal collapsed. He'd told me once that in the human realm he'd been something called a "botany professor," or a plant specialist of some sort. But since no one knows more about the nature of everything green than the Fae, his expertise wasn't needed here.

Fortunately for all of us, Alfonso soon discovered that we Fae absolutely *love* human cuisine, especially something he called "street tacos." Thanks to the rare delicacy only he knew how to make, Alfonso quickly became one of the most successful humans in the marketplace. And now I could only afford to eat there when I knew I had a good-paying job in the books.

I sighed. "Yep. Iron-free, please. I swear there will come a day when I'll brave the rash, but today's not that day."

Alfonso nodded as he began building my tacos with ingredients from the iron-free skillets. "I understand. And if someone can ever figure out how to fix that giant mirror in the forest so we can get back home, you'll need to come visit us in Los Angeles. I've done my best with the spices and plants you all have here, but just wait until you can try these with cilantro and avocado. Even if you can't have the cast-iron experience, the right flavors will make a world of difference."

As much as the addition of human blood to our population had weakened us on an international scale, one of the perks of that intermarriage was that many of the Lianthiran Fae were

no longer sensitive to iron. Of course, those of purer blood were still vulnerable; the royal family was said to have a near-fatal reaction to the metal. I was somewhere in the middle, experiencing an annoying full-body rash across my already naturally rosy skin when exposed to iron, but it was bad enough that I couldn't eat the meat and vegetables seared in Alfonso's cast-iron skillet. Even though everyone kept telling me that it was better than the stuff cooked in the aluminum skillet. Of course.

As Alfonso handed me my tacos, he lowered his voice and gave me a knowing look. "Oh, and thank you for acquiring the sandalwood and moonstone salve for Kimberly. It's doing wonders for her arthritis."

Out of habit, I glanced around to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. "Of course," I replied in a whisper. "I'm glad it's helping."

Alfonso frowned. "Was it difficult to get?"

I shook my head. "Our supplier gets it cheap, and since I know who *their* supplier is, it helps leverage the cost to us when they try to gouge us. The hardest part was getting it over the border coming back into Lianthir, but fortunately the salve looks close enough to this fancy fine butter the Seelie Court exports that if I cover myself in a bit of flour, the guards don't think anything of it."

I started to set a few coins on Alfonso's booth, but he pushed it back. "No, no. You've done us a great favor this week, so no paying today. I declare a fair trade or whatever it is you Fae say."

So that's how I ended up in high spirits with a happy belly full of Alfonso's street tacos as I stood on the pebbly cove in the dark of the night, alone and in the most elegant gown ever

required by a job. Plus, even though I now kept the wing charm in my pocket, *of course* I'd had to try it out and see myself with gigantic blue butterfly wings veined with gold before coming out tonight. That only added to the great mood I was in while waiting for an equally stealthy Fae to come along and mistake me for Evla.

Since the Queen's cousin always used glamour to appear youthful, I didn't even have to use my own glamour to make myself appear older. And I'd had to impersonate nobility enough times that I knew how to pull off an elaborate updo and cleanse the smell of the horse stables from my person. Yep, this really was going to be an easy assignment, and I would be getting two *aethline* from it.

Any Fae without my gift in subterfuge would've jumped a mile when a voice hissed, "Ceris!" Then Evla herself materialized out of the shadows, clad in an equally exquisite gown.

I frowned. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be meeting that foreign princess?"

The smirk that oozed across Evla's face made my normally steely nerves feel a bit unsettled. "Why, yes. As a matter of fact, I am."

I took a calm beat to assess the situation. "I'm not here to meet a wine smuggler, am I?" That realization seemed clear all of a sudden, and I was ashamed of myself for not seeing through the ruse to begin with.

Rocks skittering a short distance behind me caught my ear, and I spun to face the threat. As my back was turned to Evla, she grabbed me from behind and thrust me towards the ocean. A wave crashed over me just as my head struck a protruding rock, and I felt my body go limp. She almost didn't even need

the backup, her burly personal guard who had snuck up behind me, to hold me under the water.

Now I will be the first to admit that physical fights are not my strength. I'm a smuggler with a knack for mental trickery, and when I suspect a physical fight, I bring muscle with me. But I should've at least been able to fend off Evla's attack. I blame the bulky dress and the shifty pebbles underfoot for how she overtook me so easily.

After I recovered from the initial shock of the head blow and the cold water engulfing me, I popped up briefly above the surface and gulped in air. I was too busy gasping for breath to say anything, but I hoped the glare I gave Evla properly expressed the threats I couldn't voice.

"I'm sorry, Ceris. The rock was an accident," she said in a rush before she and the guard shoved me back underwater.

I fought, I kicked, I bucked, and yet all I managed to do was get myself hopelessly tangled in my dress. What a horrible, *horrible* way to end a smuggler's life! Outwitted by a dainty wisp of a royal who I *thought* was a friend!

Then they released me long enough so that I was able to rise to the surface for another gasp of air. "Remember, we only need her *half-drowned*," I heard Evla say before another wave crashed down over us.

Only half-drowned, huh? What sort of game was Evla playing?

I didn't have much time to ponder the mystery before they clearly decided I wasn't drowned enough yet and shoved me back under the water. By the time they released me for good and I was able to rise to the surface, I barely had time to acknowledge my begrudging respect for Evla's craftiness.

What do you know? She's a true Fae after all, I thought. And then the darkness took me.

Aieldir

ANGER SIMMERED within my entire being, stoked by the red-hot coals in my stomach. I was getting everything I wanted, everything the kingdom needed, but this...this wasn't right.

Despite having shut the door behind me as I left, I could still hear most of my parents' discussion from outside. It was wrong to eavesdrop, but I didn't care. It's not like they would say anything worse after my leaving than what they had already said to my face.

"I really thought that as he got older, he'd have a better grasp of the complexity and nuance of this situation," came my mother's muffled voice.

Father snorted. "It just goes to show that I was right from the beginning. There was never a need for him to know."

"That wouldn't have been fair to either of them," Mother scolded. "And this is an old argument anyway. What's done is done."

Father's reply was too low and mumbled for me to make out. *I don't care what he has to say anyway.* But even as I thought the words, I knew they weren't true.

"Yes, he certainly has gone in the opposite direction I expected," Mother admitted. "His sense of justice has only gotten stronger. I do believe our son will make a great king one day, but I hope he eventually learns that not everything is as black and white as he'd like to believe."

A short pause felt heavy and awkward, and I thought about leaving. Of course, I wasn't sure where I'd go. I had to be nearby to welcome Princess Iloma as she was due to arrive any time now, so I couldn't wander far.

I frowned at a smudge on my best leather boots and tried to buff it out on my black pants. Then I sighed at the mark it left behind on my pants and magicked the dirt away like I should've done in the first place.

"If only the portal hadn't collapsed," Mother sighed. "We wouldn't be in this mess if it was still standing. Even with magic faltering in Lianthir, at least we'd still have the economic advantage over our neighbors."

Father's voice turned as dark and slippery as a shadow. "If the portal had never existed, then we wouldn't have a son with such a single-track brain!" he hissed. "He has none of the artfulness that he needs to rule. You can't tell me that isn't the direct influence of humanity and their binary thinking. Their simplistic ways are grossly insufficient to rule over our sophisticated race."

Ouch. Now that *did* hurt a little bit. Personally, I felt I was learning to accept the "grey" we Fae lived in. I knew it didn't come to me as quickly and easily as it did to most other Fae, who practically breathed flexible ethics like oxygen from birth. Still, I was learning to navigate it. I knew that as King, I would have to embrace my Fae heritage and our history of moral complexity in order to rule over my own kind.

When I shifted against the wall I was leaning on, I discovered my sleeve had been caught on an overly ornate gilded picture frame. Good thing the frame was practically grafted into the wall, or I would've pulled the obnoxiously large oil painting down on top of myself. I sighed as I

extricated myself. I knew these large, loose slits in my white overshirt, purposely designed to show the contrasting forest green shirt underneath, were the latest trend, but they were always catching on things like this.

Mother's reply to Father was smooth, almost manipulative and artificial. Or maybe there was no "almost" to it. "I know. This is why we've summoned Princess Iloma. Aiildir needs a future queen who can bolster his hold over our citizens. No one embodies the Fae spirit better than the Kingdom of Searon. Their influence will be good for Aiildir...*and* Lianthir. Bringing in a top-notch magical bloodline to restore and preserve our power is the example our people need."

Father's reply was so soft that it took my brain a few seconds to fill in the gaps of what I initially couldn't make out. "You know I only agreed to this idea out of the potential for an alliance. If our decades-long series of mistakes catches up to us, we may need Searon's support to survive. Securing Princess Iloma as our kingdom's future queen would make it nearly impossible for them to ignore any future crisis."

I sighed and shifted from where I leaned against the wall. I knew all of this. It was why it was so important for me to impress the foreign princess and keep up appearances. There were so many secrets we couldn't afford to let slip.

"Are you expecting a future crisis?" Mother asked.

My ears perked up at that. Now *that* was something I'd like to know the answer to as well!

Father paused a little too long before answering. "I don't know. I get the sense that the Grand Council has been meeting behind my back. Now, Eirlyss, I know you're going to say that I'm paranoid, but there have been...signs. I don't think they've guessed any of our secrets, at least not yet. I think

we've covered our tracks too well. And it's a good thing because I'm almost certain there would be a revolt if they did find out. Lord Ithuir seems to be looking for a reason to take me down, and I wouldn't trust that half-Sidhe mongrel with a pair of shoes, let alone a secret that could crumple a kingdom. And if there is a crisis, we will need all the reinforcements we can muster."

Nope. I couldn't do it anymore. I needed a break—even if only a few minutes—to not think about the weight of this topic. I twisted my glass ring nervously and pushed myself off the wall.

My footsteps didn't even echo down the marble corridor thanks to my Fae training, and the fresh air invaded my lungs with a cool, flowery perfume as I exited into the moonlit gardens.

I wandered among the winding, sloping pathways that took me around fragrant bushes, beds of sprawling late-spring flowers, and viney trellises, all of which were kept strategically at waist-high or lower to prevent obstructing the greatest asset, the view of the glittering ocean, just beyond the impressive royal harbor. With the princess from Searon and her entourage set to arrive this evening, Father had insisted that our largest and most impressive ships be present and highly visible to incoming boats. We had to make ourselves appear as powerful and as favorable an ally as we could.

Both lighthouses on either side of the vast harbor were manned by soldiers watching for the arrival of the foreign visitors. Their blazing bonfires flickered like abnormally large stars at the edges of my view. The massive bells they used to announce the arrival of important visitors were noticeably silent.

“I just want this over with,” I sighed to myself. Still, I couldn’t quite convince my nerves that was the case. In fact, everything about this felt so very wrong. I wanted to avoid the whole thing altogether. My mind raced over all the ways this could go disastrously wrong, both for me and for the entire kingdom.

Yes, we’d been upfront with Searon about our weakened magic. How could we not? There was not a kingdom left among the Fae who hadn’t heard of the collapse of our portal and my father’s succession. But what if Princess Iloma arrived and realized things were worse than we had let on?

Or what if she was willing to accept a weak kingdom but not a weak King? I’d spent my entire life trying to embody the strength, the cunning, the shrewdness of the culture I had been born into—*my* culture, *my* heritage, *my* people—and yet I consistently fell short. My parents had always been loving towards me, in their own way, but their concern and disappointment had always been apparent.

I knew my failure to be a compelling monarch was part of what made it so imperative that I secure a powerful bride, especially one who represented an intimidating ally. As an unimpressive king of a wounded kingdom, I would be vulnerable to attack. To protect my future, as well as the Kingdom of Lianthir, my parents had arranged this meeting.

And after hearing what my father said about Lord Ithuir and supposedly other Grand Council members, revolt could even come from within. My position was even more precarious than I originally thought. As if the pressure on me to impress the Searonian princess wasn’t bad enough, now I had to win her approval just to protect myself from my own people.

As cool as the breeze was, as steady as the distant crashing waves, I should've been calmed by them, but my inner storm brewed and boiled over. I growled out my anger...and a puff of my smoke-like magic, accidentally igniting a nearby hedge. "Oh—oh, I'm so sorry," I sputtered and then immediately felt sheepish that I had apologized to a bush.

With a wave of my hand, I extinguished the fire and healed the scorched branches. "There. No one will be able to tell," I mumbled. Then I prodded myself mentally, making sure my glamour meant to impress the foreign princess was still in place and hadn't flickered as I expended my magic. Yes, my onyx locks were still as glossy and smooth as the night sky, my jaw and cheekbones as sharp as hewn granite.

For the thousandth time, my curious thoughts bubbled to the surface of my mind, wondering if the princess would be someone I could enjoy being married to, but I ruthlessly crushed those ponderings. The importance of making a good impression and winning her over had to be forefront. I didn't have the luxury of marrying for love or even choosing my bride based on tolerability.

I placed my hands on the top of a low wall and leaned against it, the rough stone irritating my palms, as I gazed out at the moon-speckled ocean. At that moment, I didn't care that my parents were right about my being so heavily influenced by human culture. Fae cultural expectations were what got us tangled up in this mess to begin with.

None of this felt right. I wanted to be King, but I wanted to do it the right way. Unfortunately, Lianthir had a mottled culture—a strange, poorly-incorporated blend of Fae and human values. And those sets of values had moral compasses which pointed in very different directions.

Maybe one day when I am King, I'll have more influence to change things, I thought. But as of now, I have to take the circumstances I've been given and make the best of them. Take things as they are, Aiildir, and then go from there.

I was finished with my pep talk and about to head back inside to await the princess when I heard a shout echoing out from the direction of the ocean. A familiar voice cried, “*Help! Please, someone find a healer. It’s the Princess Iloma!*”

I immediately recognized Evla’s voice and turned towards the sound. There, a dark silhouette was barely visible moving in the blackness of the late evening.

I tore across the garden, leaping over benches and flowerbeds. Although I was closer, the winding garden path slowed me down slightly so that I arrived at her side at almost exactly the same time as the palace guards who had come directly from their various posts. Mother and Father must have already been waiting near the Great Hall, for they arrived mere seconds after us.

Evla looked an absolute mess, her skirts soaked through and her hair fallen from its elaborate design, but her glamour, like mine, was still flawless. Beside Evla stood her personal guard, Riardel, who cradled a sopping mess of so many layers of expensive cloth that I almost missed the young woman within.

Despite the lamps filled with orbs of light magic scattered throughout the garden, it was hard to see the unconscious woman among the shadows. Her dark brown hair hinted at waves while still sopping wet, and her full, sunrise-pink lips helped to soften the hard look of her prominent cheekbones and eyebrows that looked stern even now.

“I think she must’ve been shipwrecked,” Evla said through teeth beginning to chatter, probably from her wet clothing. “Her eyes only opened for a moment when I pulled her from the water, but she did state that she was Princess Iloma, coming to see the Lianthiran royal family. We’ll want to have the guards comb the coasts to look for additional survivors.”

“Yes, indeed,” Mother agreed, nodding eagerly, eyes widened with alarm. “I can’t imagine what a fright the poor girl must have been through. Quickly, Riardel! Take her to the rooms we prepared for her. And Cadfyn, send for whichever healers are on duty.”

“I’ll go with Riardel and help the poor thing get settled,” Evla volunteered as she and Riardel began moving towards the castle entrance.

Mother gave a relieved sigh. “Thank you, Evla. I’ll have a fresh change of clothes sent to you there so you don’t have to remain in those wet things,” she called after her.

Father’s shocked eyes turned on me. “We’ve incurred a new debt to that woman. Can you imagine the fallout if she hadn’t saved that poor girl from a disastrous end?”

My stomach twisted in knots at the implications. “No. I couldn’t bear to imagine that.”

The princess was so tall that Riardel had to turn sideways to fit the long-legged girl through the doorway, and as he twisted, the light from inside the castle spilled across the unconscious figure. With her prominent cheekbones and eyebrows arrogant even in her current state, she appeared as dignified as I’d imagined a princess with such a strong magical heritage to look. A shiver shot up my spine as I wondered if there was any possible chance I could prove myself a worthy marriage partner to her.

Within seconds, all the guards and attendants who had come to answer Evla's call for assistance had retreated back inside or returned to their posts along the castle perimeter. I took one step after them to follow the guards inside, but Mother's firm, insistent hand held me back. My parents and I lingered until we were alone in the gardens with only the ivy climbing the castle walls to overhear us.

In a low, muttered tone, Mother said, "Aieldir, give them a few minutes or so of privacy for Evla and the attendants to dress the princess in something dry and warm and get her settled. Then head up to the room to sit by her bedside, and wait with them for the princess to awaken. With any luck, your face will be the first she sees, and she'll associate you with her rescue and as someone she can lean on and trust."

I nodded. "I understand, Mother."

Although a thousand questions flooded my mind over what had just transpired, a nagging thought seemed to crowd out the others, one that seemed especially ominous in the light of all the talk about possible revolt.

Yes, it was dark. Yes, she'd been drenched. But somehow I knew that I'd seen this Princess Iloma before.

Chapter 2

The Deception



Ceris

Soft, fuzzy voices invaded my muddled ears. I couldn't quite tell what they were saying because my brain hadn't caught up yet, but their tone was peaceful. Sleep beckoned me back into a deeper state of unconsciousness, and I sighed in contentment.

But...

Everything that had happened at the cove rushed back to me. Evla's betrayal, hearing that she needed me "half-drowned," the anger at being caught so off-guard. It filled me with enough fire that I tried to claw my way back to the surface of reality, but it was like trying to swim to the surface in a waterlogged gown all over again.

My eyes flickered open briefly, and I saw my betrayer's face turned towards mine before my eyelids gave up and crashed down again. I'd also seen another face, but it was so brief that I couldn't be sure. Had that been...Prince Aiendir?

Evla's voice grew more intelligible, but she still sounded smudged. I probably had half the ocean in my ears.

"Aiendir, why don't you visit the kitchens and see about having some tea sent up? I have a feeling it won't be much

longer until she wakes up, and a steaming pot of tea will do her some good.”

I expected the heir to the throne to balk at that and delegate the task to a servant, but I heard him say, “Sure, Evla. That’s probably a good idea.” Then despite my eyes still refusing to reopen, I heard his swift steps leave the room.

As soon as his footsteps receded beyond earshot, Evla hissed in my ear. “Ceris, are you awake enough to hear me?”

I tried to open my eyes but could barely do better than a flutter of my lashes. At least I was able to groan out, “I’m here. And when I can move again, I will promise you the most painful death I can dream up.”

“Yes, yes, and it will be well-deserved,” Evla said in a rather dismissive tone. “But before you do, there are some things you must know.”

My eyelids finally obeyed my command to open, and I fixed Evla with what I hoped was a withering stare despite the pain and weakness that made it nearly impossible to move. “Such as the quickest, most brutal poisons? Because I already know those.”

Then my ocean-muddled brain finally started to catch up as my surroundings came into focus. I was in a room with pristine white walls but extravagantly decorated in gold and shades of blue. There were tapestries depicting night-time forest scenes, golden vases on pedestals dripping with heavy white blossoms, and thick drapes letting in just the right amount of sunlight for a cozy feel.

Thorns and thistles, I must be in the palace, I thought as I felt the color drain from my face. *This is the last place any criminal wants to find herself!*

Evla ignored my comment with the poise and grace of a pure-blood royal Fae. “The royal family believes you to be Princess Iloma. You must continue the charade for their sake, mine, and yours.”

Things began to click into place as I considered her words in my water-muddled brain. “You’ve been plotting this for a while.”

“Not as long as you might think,” Evla confessed. “Only since I intercepted the letter from Searon last month which said they would not be considering marriage or an alliance with Lianthir and therefore declined our invitation for a visit from the princess.”

I tried to push myself into a seated position and immediately regretted it when a sharp pain racked my chest, and I collapsed back on the bed in an angry, violent coughing fit, which took several minutes to subside.

Finally, through narrowed, watering eyes, I glared at my former friend. “Evla, there is no way this scheme will end well. Eventually, everyone will know I’m not Princess Iloma.”

Evla somehow managed to sit up even straighter and appear even more regal. “I admit that this likely will not last forever, but it will buy us time.”

“Time for what?” I growled.

Evla waved a haughty hand. “I don’t have time to explain *everything*. It won’t take Aiendir that long to return with the tea I sent him for.”

She looked behind her as though concerned she’d summoned him by simply saying his name. Satisfied she still had time, she turned back to me. “By the way, it may be a good idea to pretend you’re still unconscious when he gets

back. But when you do finally choose to wake for good, you need to go along with convincing them you're the princess."

"And why would I do that?"

A small, unpleasant smile crossed Evla's face. "Because if you don't, and if they find out who you really are, do you think they won't look into your life, your background, your activity? When they investigate how a horse trainer's assistant fell into such a scheme, you know they'll discover your medicinal trafficking ring. If you don't want to call attention to your co-conspirators and your illicit activity, you'll go along with it for as long as necessary."

A hot anger started boiling deep in my abdomen. "So you have chosen to sacrifice me—and everyone who relies on the goods I traffic—for what? Do you even have an end game? I take back everything I've ever said about you being the ultimate Fae. You can't even scheme as well as most mixed-blood Fae I know."

Evla's poise didn't falter for one moment. Instead she gave another one of her impossibly graceful shrugs. "Yes, I'm starting to regret not bringing you into the earliest part of my strategizing, but no matter. I can use your expertise going forward. And now that I've caught you up in the middle of it, you'll be extra motivated to see that we succeed."

Although her assessment wasn't exactly wrong, my pride wouldn't allow me to vocally acknowledge it. "So do you have co-conspirators I should know about?"

One corner of Evla's mouth twitched. "Only Riardel, but we don't have time right now to discuss what's been done. I need to spend what time we have left alone sharing with you what you need to know about Princess Iloma and the current

relations between our kingdoms so you know how to pull this off.”

I bit off a sarcastic comment and instead gave a sharp nod. Hopefully, there would be time later to deal with Evla’s disastrous actions. But at the moment, she was right that we needed to focus on not making this situation worse.

Evla took a deep breath and surged ahead. “You know how the collapse of the portal to the human world showed how weak the Kingdom of Lianthir had become; I don’t need to remind you of that. Or how you Lianthirans have lost so much of your magical prowess due to generations of intermarriage with humans.”

In my impatience, I placed a firm hand on the royal’s arm—a gesture that would’ve been friendly if I hadn’t squeezed her arm with a strength just shy of hurting her. “Evla,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

With a hiss, Evla sucked in a breath and nodded. “Yes, of course,” she admitted with sheepish eyes. “Our time is short. I’ll cut right to it.

“You see, there’s been immense pressure on Aieldir to secure a powerful bride, both in political and magical terms, to bolster Lianthir’s standing. If the other nations realize just how vulnerable we are here, we may need a powerful alliance to either deter any attempt to conquer Lianthir or protection in case they do risk a full-on attack on our borders. Searon is the perfect balance of having high political influence while also being one of the more benevolent nations. That’s why King Ildemar courted them first and revealed the troubles of the kingdom.”

I studied the navy and gold design on the bedspread before me, deep in thought. I had either known or suspected much of

this before, but if my own king had made himself so vulnerable to the King of Searon, things had to be worse than I thought. It went against our culture to reveal such weakness, so he must've been desperate indeed. And that didn't bode well for Lianthir.

“And this might be the most dangerous part of our scheme,” Evla said slowly.

I frowned at the phrase, “*our* scheme,” but I allowed Evla to continue.

Evla's eyes were grave. “They will surely test your magic. They would've done it anyway to make sure they're bringing in a strong enough future queen, but now that you've arrived at the palace in such an unexpected way, with no companions to verify your identity, they'll want to make sure you're Princess Iloma and as powerful as they say. I know there will be at least two, possibly three tests.”

Fury started bubbling in my stomach—the kind of fury that fear becomes when you're not in a position to give into it. I knew when I stared at someone just right, my almond-shaped, steely grey eyes had a knife-like, intimidating effect on people, a trait which I frequently used on swindlers trying to pass off fake medicines to me. So I fixed Evla with my most fiery and intimidating version of that stare before replying.

“Evla,” I said calmly, my voice dangerously low, “I am from Lianthir. I've got nearly as many human ancestors as I do Fae. There's no way my feeble magic could pass for that of a pure-blood princess of Searon!”

For the first time, Evla looked uncomfortable. “I think you might,” she said in an unconvincing tone. “You have more magic than any other Lianthiran Fae I've met...outside the royal family and most nobles, of course, since they never

intermarried with humans. I guess that's one point for arranged marriages."

I sighed and fixed Evla with a glare. "First of all, I'm not sure why you felt the need to enlist a fake princess anyway. But if you did, why didn't you reach out to someone from your own kingdom? Veldyr has remained just as untainted from human blood as Searon has. Surely, you would've been able to find someone who could pull this off better. All this is going to do is create a massive scandal when it all blows up, and when those more bloodthirsty nations catch wind of it, we'll look to them like a wounded antelope does to a manicomore."

Evla quickly dismissed the subject with a vague, "Veldyr wasn't an option."

I wanted to push her further, but Evla surged ahead.

"Besides being a convenient target and easy to trap due to our relationship—" Evla purposely avoided my raging, fiery glower by focusing her gaze out the window beside the bed, "—I actually chose you *because* of your talent in magic, and because you're the most accomplished liar and impersonator I know. If anyone here in Lianthir could pull this off, it would be you."

For several seconds, the only sound in the room was my fingernails tapping a firm, steady beat on the bedside table as I fixed my eyes on Evla and weighed the situation. She was right that there was no way to get out of this now without putting myself and my activities under scrutiny. As poorly constructed as Evla's plan was, I had to find a way to go along with it.

"I don't suppose you know what this first test is? You know, given your position?"

Evla sighed. “I’m not certain yet. I think they’re deciding between a few options, but—”

Suddenly, her shoulders jerked back, and she spun her face towards the doorway. When she turned back to me, her voice dropped to a whisper. “I think I hear Aiildir coming. We’ll have to discuss this later.”

I settled down deeper under the covers and feigned unconsciousness. Fortunately, my muscle memory recalled the position I’d been in minutes before, so hopefully the prince wouldn’t notice I’d stirred. This was going to be my most challenging venture yet.

Aiildir

I’D HALF-EXPECTED to find the princess awake when I returned, but her eyes remained shut and limbs relaxed. That was a bit of a relief for now. For a couple hours, I had been practicing in my head what I’d say to her when she woke up, but as I gazed at her still form, I felt all my intelligence drain away.

I kept my voice low as I addressed Evla. “I spoke to Idella, one of the kitchen assistants. She’ll be bringing up not only a pot of tea but also some bland foods, since we have no idea when the princess ate last. Even though the healers have already administered their potions, Idella’s going to try to include as many foods with healing properties. I know that Donamir said that she’s in remarkably good health considering her ordeal, but Idella says we should offer whatever strength we can give her.”

“That’s gracious of her,” Evla said with a nod. “Any chance that they’ll push back Princess Iloma’s first test to give

her time to recover?”

As I lowered myself into the chair next to Evla, I thought I saw the fingers on Princess Iloma’s right hand twitch. “I know Mother and Father have been discussing that,” I said, my eyes not moving from that hand. “I know they’re in a hurry to secure our marriage and the alliance.”

I stopped myself short from mentioning my father’s concerns about revolt and his suspicions of Lord Ithuir. I didn’t think Evla would know about that, nor would Father want her to.

“Considering Donamir’s positive report,” I continued, “I doubt they’ll put it off. As chief healer, he seems to think she’ll be healed enough in two days to go ahead and stick with our original schedule. I don’t think they’ll push it back any further unless she shows unexpected signs that she’s worse off than he thinks.”

Evla reached out and placed a comforting hand over mine, where it rested on my knee. “She’ll be fine, Aiendir. This will work.” Her voice rose a degree or two in volume as she continued, “I know you’re worried that the princess will find you an unimpressive potential mate and that the match will be ruined, but I’m certain she’ll find you charming.”

Oh please, oh please, don’t let the princess have heard that, I begged inwardly. Please let her be so deeply asleep that I don’t have to feel embarrassed by Evla revealing my insecurities.

I found myself staring at her face, checking for any signs of alertness, and I was struck again by how familiar she seemed. Was it possible that Evla had misunderstood when she rescued this stranger from the sea? Perhaps this wasn’t the

foreign princess we were meant to expect. Really, she could be anybody.

I tapped my chin as I mulled this possibility over, secretly checking to make sure my glamour was still in place and that my face still had its angular features in case the princess woke up. “I haven’t heard of any more survivors found along the shore. Or even of any wreckage from the ship. Was the princess not able to give you any information last night? Was she able to say whether the ship was attacked?”

A muscle in Evla’s cheek twitched. “She wasn’t able to provide any information I could understand. She wasn’t fully coherent, but Searon is far too powerful a nation to even fathom that they’d be attacked out on the open sea like that. I only made out that she had to get to the royal palace in Lianthir, that we were expecting her. My first thought was that she might’ve been an attendant to the princess, but then she told me that she herself was Iloma. After that, she fell too deeply unconscious to say more.”

“You’re sure she was the princess? Not an attendant?”

Evla nodded, her eyes still never leaving the unconscious woman’s face. “It was difficult to see much in the darkness when I pulled her from the water, but once I got her to the palace, I could see the dress she was wearing was too fine for an attendant. It was definitely worthy of a princess meeting a suitor.”

After a moment, another thought occurred to me that also corroborated Evla’s story. “Yes, that dress. I bet that dress is why she’s the only survivor. A dress like that would normally weigh a woman down in the water, but I bet hers was layered with spells for buoyancy.”

Evla finally tore her large, startled eyes from the alleged princess to look at me. “That’s an excellent point, Aiendir! And with how unbelievably expensive those sorts of spelled gowns are, it makes sense that the princess would be the only one with such a dress.”

Evla jumped to her feet, causing her skirts to rustle. “I have things I must attend to, most importantly meeting with your mother first.”

Her departure seemed oddly abrupt, but she was gone before I could formulate a question about her behavior. I was perplexed by her reaction to my theory, but I had to admit that it also gave me a satisfying boost of self-confidence in my own cleverness. I may not be the most cunning of Fae royalty, but it was nice to remember that old-fashioned intelligence could also be helpful in my future role as King.

The moment I settled back in my armchair and began to relax, the princess began to stir. I sat up so quickly that I felt a small crack in my neck, and my pulse started racing. *Oh no. I really should’ve spent this time thinking about what I’d say to her when she woke up. I don’t even have Evla here as a buffer!*

The eyes that cracked hesitantly open were almond-shaped and a bit on the smaller side, but even in their grogginess, a shrewd intellect flickered there as the princess surveyed the room. Her mouth grew rigid as though she’d gone from unconscious to high alert in an instant. Then those sharp eyes caught mine, and I suddenly felt very aware that I was alone in the princess’s bedroom with her, sans chaperone.

I nearly pushed myself out of my chair to stumble to the door and call for someone, but her words transfixed me. “Is this the Gossamer Palace? Did I make it to Lianthir?”

The princess's voice sounded raw and sea-battered, and she began to cough wretchedly as soon as the words left her mouth. *How alarmed should I be? Should I call for a healer again?*

"Yes, you made it here," I said quickly. "Please forgive me for saying this, but you sound horrible, Your Highness. May I call someone for you?"

Despite her coughs, she waved a frantic hand at me. "No, no," she wheezed out after a moment. Ever so slowly, she pushed herself to be a few degrees more upright. "I feel the saltwater has nearly left me. However, I fear I'm making a rather underwhelming first impression and not at all the entrance I'd hoped to."

I raised an eyebrow. "The fact that you're alive after a shipwreck seems like a pretty strong entrance to me. The fact that we've yet to find any parts of the ship or other survivors seems to imply it was an awful wreck."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I was horror-struck and wished I could swallow them back. Her companions were on that ship, likely including people she cared about. *You couldn't have said that with a little more sensitivity, genius?*

Fortunately, the princess seemed of heartier stock than many of the ladies of court I'd known. Instead of any strong display of emotion, she simply nodded and asked, "So you haven't found any of the others yet? That's not surprising."

She cleared her throat, and this time, her voice came out stronger and smoother. "I'm not sure how far out we were when the ship went down, but I doubt any of the others were wearing clothing spelled for buoyancy. If we were still out in

deep waters, I imagine the others and our ship are likely lost to the ages.”

Under normal circumstances, I would’ve been pleased—perhaps even a little smug—at hearing I was right about the spelled dress. But at the moment, I couldn’t think about that.

Instead, I was consumed by the sudden realization that I knew exactly who sat in front of me, and it wasn’t Princess Iloma. I thought the dark brown hair, sharp chin, and calculating eyes had seemed familiar, but I couldn’t place her until I’d coupled her appearance with her smooth alto voice, even cracked from her recent trauma.

From time to time, especially when frustrated with my parents and their disappointment in me, I would stop by Evla’s suite for an unannounced visit. Evla always understood me better than the king and queen did.

One of those times, I’d heard an unfamiliar voice coming from Evla’s rooms, so I’d hung back, not wanting to interrupt but also not wanting to eavesdrop, waiting until the mysterious visitor left. I’d even made my way down to the courtyard below, where the guest entrance was, so I could keep an eye for the stranger’s departure and catch Evla as soon as she was free. Not far from the guest entrance was a small alcove with a stone bench, where I had sat and fumed over how my parents refused to even entertain the idea of revealing some of our secrets to the kingdom, or at least to our nobles. I knew Evla would understand because she was also growing more uncomfortable with all the lies.

After nearly a quarter of an hour, I’d seen a shaft of light stretch across the courtyard, and the strange woman appeared in the doorway wearing a chocolate-brown cloak with an embroidered edge. “Next time you get another shipment of

that wine in, you better invite me over for another nightcap,” she’d spoken just loud enough to reach me in the alcove. “I know you can’t afford to be seen with me in public, but if you’re ever open to a disguise, I’d love to take you to a certain tavern in town.”

After a couple of girlish, tipsy giggles and goodnights between her and Evla, the strange woman had made her way out of the courtyard, passing right by my alcove where I sat, not breathing and doing my best to stay invisible in the shadows. As the glow from one of Evla’s lighted windows caught her face, it had illuminated a stray lock of dark brown hair and a languid smile under prominent cheekbones. The light hadn’t been quite enough to distinguish the shade of her dark dress—navy blue, perhaps?—since it was further shadowed by the brown cloak, but it was of a simple cut that no noblewoman would ever dream to allow on her person.

I’d been curious about her at the time, but mostly so annoyed by how Evla now seemed in no state for a heavy discussion that I’d pushed the elegant stranger from my mind. So Evla had a commoner friend. Good for her, but the strange visitor hadn’t been enough to distract me from the fury at my parents, and now at Evla, bubbling up inside me.

But now that beautiful, nameless guest with the dark hair and sharp cheekbones was looking back at me, offering an identity I knew couldn’t be true. All she lacked was the chocolate-brown cloak that I remembered fluttering about her as she slipped silently through the castle courtyard.

Chapter 3

The First Test



Ceris

By the time the prince left, I felt confident I'd kept up the royal pretense. He'd refrained from asking any probing questions, which filled me with relief. I was reasonably talented at improvising a backstory when needed, but with this situation calling for a long-term game of deception, I was hoping for some time to myself (and perhaps with Evla) to construct a sturdier facade.

Unfortunately, not long after the prince left with some vague excuse of duties towards the military, the king and queen themselves deigned to visit me. They swept into the room so quietly, without even a rustle from their layers of silk, that if a servant hadn't announced them first, I would've been caught entirely off guard.

King Ildemar was a tall man with some of the most sharply tapered ears I'd ever seen, perhaps a gift of his full-blood heritage. His nearly-black hair was cut almost severely short, a modern trend that had only recently overtaken the tradition of long hair among the men of the Fae. He wore an indigo embroidered doublet over a pale blue tunic *and* a trailing flint grey cape despite the late-summer warmth, but each layer

looked so impossibly thin and light that I doubted he was at all uncomfortable.

Queen Eirlyss was nearly as tall as her husband, her hair a medium brown that seemed to have a reddish glow when the sunlight kissed it. Her eyes were piercing and full of self-assurance, despite a veil of compassion that she wore across her face as she looked at my ocean-beaten body. Her gown was lavender with golden and deep blue stitching in intricate designs across the bodice, and she wore a cape that matched her husband's.

Most striking of all were their matching wings which soared high above them in a display that was clearly meant to impress me. They were cream-colored with chestnut veins, and although I couldn't tell what they were made from without touching them, I didn't think they were membranous (like butterfly wings) or fleshy (like bat wings) but rather something in between. I imagined they felt silky to the touch, but to even *think* about touching a Fae's wings, especially a royal's, was an unforgivable blunder.

I held back a smirk as I surveyed them, aware that their beauty was almost certainly the result of glamour. I hadn't yet decided if I'd apply glamour at some point and simply claim to not have had the strength before to utilize it, or if I should pretend that my natural beauty was actually a layer of glamour so potent that not even a near-drowning could wash it away. After all, I'd been blessed with the prominent cheekbones and smooth skin prized by the Fae, and I thought I looked attractive enough to look reasonably well-glamoured even without magically altering my appearance.

"We are relieved you've survived your tragic journey here," Queen Eirlyss said, her musical voice as smooth as the

satin sheets surrounding me. “I cannot imagine the terror you must have felt as your ship was destroyed.”

I conjured up a look of sorrow tinged with gratitude. “I am thankful to be here and in relatively good health, but I think I’m still too much in shock to grasp the immense loss of my fellow Searonians. I can’t believe they’re all gone.” The perfectly-timed hitch in my voice at the end of my reply was sure to sell the false emotion.

“I can’t imagine,” the queen said with the appropriate level of sorrow adorning her too-perfect face. “The healer has told us you’d be physically recovered enough to take on your first test two days from now, but if you feel you need more time to mourn your loss and recover mentally, we understand.”

The king’s lowered brow matched his soft, rumbling voice. “You are aware of the correspondence we had with your parents and our kingdom’s situation? They informed you why testing your magic was necessary for the Kingdom of Lianthir and our potential alliance?”

I had to draw on my most advanced acting skills to disguise my apprehension behind a mask of royal self-assurance. “Of course. I have been thoroughly educated on Lianthir’s *vulnerabilities*,” I said slowly, choosing a word that I believed a haughty yet diplomatic princess would say in place of “weaknesses.”

“Still,” I continued, “you may rest assured that I shall be ready in two days’ time. The loss of my fellow Searonians is a great burden, but I am as eager as you are to proceed with my reason for being here. I believe they would want that, seeing how much they sacrificed for me to be here with you today.”

The king and queen visibly relaxed, pleased with my answer. It had sounded a touch harsh to my own ears, but I

figured a pure-blood Fae princess, unsoiled by human tenderness, would have said likewise.

“If I may be so bold to say so,” the Queen said, “I do not have any concerns about your passing the tests. Why, if your magic is so strong to hold your glamour throughout nearly drowning and falling unconscious for so long, I can only imagine what you’re capable of when conscious and at full physical strength.”

The satisfied smile I wore was laced with genuine vanity at hearing that the Queen considered my dark brown waves and grey eyes beautiful enough to be a powerful glamour. Her comment made my choice whether to glamour later or not that much easier. I was pleased that this meant I could focus all my magic on the tests later instead of trying to funnel some of it off into maintaining my appearance.

“Your Majesty is too kind,” I purred. “I shall look forward to the test. When do I find out what it is? Is it a surprise?”

“Not at all,” the king replied. “I don’t mind telling you now. You see, we recently had a monastery destroyed by a landslide. Fortunately, no one was hurt, and due to its seclusion at the base of the mountain, there were no other structures nearby to be damaged.”

“Yes,” the queen added eagerly. “It was very fortunate indeed. The nearest village is half a mile away, and it was spared. They’ve taken the monks in for now, but we must rebuild the monastery. The holy brethren are insistent upon it being rebuilt in the same location because they consider the site itself most holy.”

The king nodded in confirmation. “That’s where you come in. We thought this scenario would be the perfect opportunity for a test of magic. Before it can be rebuilt, the debris—both

from the landslide itself and the rubble of the ruined buildings—must be cleared. We've preserved the site for you so you can use whatever magical means you deem best to clear the area and prepare it for a new religious sanctuary.”

At hearing that, it suddenly felt like all the seawater I'd spent the past day coughing up had seeped back into my stomach. This was no mere parlor trick. They wanted a massive display of power like I'd never seen from any Lianthiran Fae. I knew we'd lost a lot of magic here over the past several generations, but just how powerful *were* the Fae of other nations?

Fortunately, my greatest skill was masking over my fear and discomfort with serenity and poise. I kept my gaze perfectly level and my tone low and fluid as I replied, “That is no small feat, but I am confident it can be done.”

Queen Eirlyss gave a vaguely feline smile of satisfaction. “That is good to hear.”

Angling herself just right so that their wings didn't collide, she snaked her left arm around her husband's elbow and used her other hand to pat his arm, signaling him in no subtle manner that they should be leaving. “I wish we could stay and get to know you better, but we were warned before entering that you are still in great need of rest,” she continued. “No matter. I'm sure there'll be further opportunities to get acquainted later.”

The king's free hand reached across his body to trap his wife's where it rested on his arm. “Of course, my dear. Let's leave our honored guest to recover. The full recovery she should be making won't be helped along by us disturbing her rest any longer.”

He inclined his head sharply towards me. “Your Highness, we do wish to express our deepest gratitude that you are here and that you’ve made it safely. Our kingdom will seek to be a beneficial partner in our proposed arrangements.”

The barest shiver of misty magic danced across my skin as I barely held back a gasp. Although the royal couple turned and walked away, my wide-eyed stare bored into their backs all the way out the door. King Ildemar’s words were powerful and binding not just culturally, but also magically. In the Fae realm, words of gratitude implied a debt owed—a Favor—putting Lianthir squarely in Searon’s debt.

Except...he’d expressed that gratitude and a desire to be a “beneficial partner” not to a representative from Searon, but to *me*. Oh, how could I use that magic-bound Favor to my advantage? A dark glee bubbled up within me, as that natural Fae hunger for power purred in contentment at the possibilities.

Just then, Evla popped into the room with a smug look on her face. My calculating brain determined that between the look on her face and the precise length of time it had taken her to appear after her cousins had left, it was almost certain that she’d been observing and waiting for them to leave before coming in.

I glared at her. “You know I can’t complete the task they just described. Leveling a landslide site for an entire monastery? You *know* this is exactly why your cousins are so paranoid that we’ll become victims of the greedier kings and queens, don’t you? Because we Lianthirans can’t stand up against attacks from nature let alone an army of pure-blood Fae magicians!”

The satisfied smile on Evla's face didn't waver in the slightest. "My dear *Iloma*, you have no idea what you're capable of."

She was partially correct in that I didn't know my own strength. It had become clear from a young age that through some trick of genetics (a concept taught to us by the humans), I'd managed to inherit more magic than my parents' and older sister's mediocre magical skills would suggest I should possess. I was passed from trainer to trainer who taught all they could teach me, but as diluted as Lianthiran magic was, the strongest magicians I had access to as a small-town farrier's daughter could barely produce more than cheap theatrics and rudimentary glamour.

Of course, everyone knew there were more powerful Fae to be found in Lianthir, but they were hoarded by the royal family up in the palace. When I left home and came up to the capital, it was originally to gain proximity to those celebrated magicians, but it didn't take long before I found myself wrapped up in my master's smuggling ring. And now I most certainly didn't need the attention of royal magicians, thank you very much.

Therefore, Evla had an almost valid point. My village magicians had done all they could with me, and since my magic went beyond theirs, no one ever knew for sure how strong mine was. I did seem to be an anomaly as far as having inherited more than my fair share of magic in our mixed-blood kingdom.

Clenching my teeth in frustration, I shook my head and then let out a huge breath. "All right, Evla. Let's pretend for one moment that I have enough magic to do this task. I don't, but let's pretend. There's no way even a *powerful* magician

could sweep away the rubble from such a massive disaster without extensive training. There's a big difference between using magic to clear the dishes away after dinner and clearing away an entire *landslide*."

Evla shrugged in indifference. "Speaking as one of those 'powerful magicians,' there's probably not as big of a difference as you think there is. You'll be fine. Do I need to remind you that I chose you because of your magical prowess?"

"And my anonymity?" I raised a perfectly-shaped eyebrow.

"That too," she conceded. "You are the most powerful *unknown* Fae in this part of the realm, and it just so happens that you are conveniently one of the most accomplished deceivers I've ever known. You are the perfect fit for this job."

I tried to interrupt, but Evla continued to barrel through my predictable objections. "*And* you will find a way to use your under-trained magic to level that monastery because you're passionate about your precious trafficking ring and wouldn't dare risk having the royal family scrutinizing your true identity and your lifestyle. Not with as careful as you've always been to keep yourself and your work invisible."

There was nothing I could say to that. Evla may have been one of my closest friends, but at that moment I hated her. I hated her for the snare she had me in. I hated how she—in true Fae form—sat with a small contented smile while I fumed, knowing she had the upper hand. I hated how even if I was found out and tried to implicate her in the scheme, she'd be untouchable as the Queen's cousin.

And yet, at the same time that I hated her, I also begrudgingly respected her bold level of trickery that my

devilish Fae heart valued.

I gave a deep sigh of resentment. “Fine. Tell me everything I need to know about Searon, the royal family, and our relationship with them so that I can fool them long enough to figure a way out of your mess.”

Aieldir

OVER THE NEXT TWO DAYS, I visited the young woman claiming to be Princess Iloma on several occasions. At first, it was due to Mother’s prompting. Since Lianthir was no great prize of a kingdom and I was “overly influenced by human culture” (stated in her most resigned tone), I needed to highlight my value as a dotting, caring spouse.

Yet I also had to admit that I was intrigued by this impostor and how she came to be both connected with Evla and part of this scheme, the purpose of which I hadn’t yet determined. I tried catching her in a blunder by asking questions about Searon and the communications between our families as we made arrangements for her visit. Her answers were so deft and convincing that I found myself wondering on multiple occasions what the odds were that I’d somehow gotten this whole scenario wrong.

Still, I knew I’d seen this woman emerging from Evla’s suite weeks ago. Even if—as far-fetched as it was—this “Iloma” could be the true Searonian princess, she had to be conspiring with Evla in some way. Why would a foreign princess be in our country weeks earlier than expected and sneaking around with a member of the royal family without alerting the monarchs?

No, Evla was up to something. To most, she seemed regal and powerful, but benign by Fae standards. I knew better than most how crafty she could be, and whatever this scheme was, it had the overly-refined fragrance of Evla about it.

The morning after I recognized the false princess as Evla's nightly visitor, I reached out and scheduled an unofficial meeting with my childhood friend Loethar. Not surprisingly, he accosted me fifteen minutes before the appointed time by snatching me from an empty corridor as I was heading towards my study. Before I could so much as inhale to voice my protest, he whisked me into a rarely-used sitting room lit only by a shaft of sunlight peeking through a crack in the drapes and shoved me into a chair.

I gave my best princely glare at him, but his innocent smile showed he was clearly unaffected by it. "You really picked the right profession when you became a Scout," I grumbled. "Scout" was a rather diplomatic title for what were essentially our intelligence operatives.

Loethar's grin expanded to add a sparkle to his mischievous eyes. "I do so enjoy it," he admitted. "And now I have the feeling you're about to give me a particularly delicious job, which I can't wait to hear about. What does my oldest, dearest, and most royal of friends require of me today?"

"This is the type of job that must remain at the highest level of confidentiality," I said. "No paperwork, no reports, nothing that could possibly create physical evidence of this investigation."

Despite the dim light in the room, a gleam entered Loethar's eyes. "My favorite kind."

I tapped my fingertips nervously on the arm of the chair. There were so many ways this could go horribly wrong, not just for me personally, but also on an international level. That's why Loethar was the only one I could trust with this. But even with his expertise in such delicate matters, was it still too much of a risk?

"This 'Princess Iloma,'" I started slowly, "is not who she says she is, but she is a very convincing charlatan. I'm fairly certain Evla is behind whatever is happening, but I cannot for the life of me imagine what the intended purpose of this deception is or who this young lady could possibly be. I need as much information as you can give me."

The way his mouth gaped open and wonder filled his eyes, anyone would've thought that I'd presented Loethar with the greatest desire of his heart. "Your Highness," he breathed, the use of my title showing just how utterly delighted he was, "I am honored to investigate the devilry of my potential future queen. To think that you are trusting me with the possibility of bringing down a fraudulent royal is—"

"*Loethar*," I groaned with a roll of my eyes. As much fondness as I held towards my closest friend, his false flattery was sometimes a little *too* Fae. "I don't need to tell you how dangerous it would be if word of this got out, correct?"

"Of course not, Aiendir," he replied with a respectful nod. "I've had my fair share of assignments among the kingdoms. Searon is one of the only benevolent ones, and thus offending them in any way would be equivalent to offering your entire family to them, bound and gagged, along with a set of tastefully jeweled daggers with which to murder you."

"With your leave, I shall begin straight away."

I finally cracked a grin and waved him off. “Go. Have fun.”

As I watched Loethar slip out the door and melt into the shadows, I twisted my glass ring nervously. There was something soothing about the sensation of the frosted glass against my fingertips while the smooth side slid against the more delicate skin beneath my ever-present ring. And that calming habit was something I repeated quite frequently leading up to the first trial, twisting and spinning the ring as I wondered if investigating the “princess” was the wisest move.

Even as I rode in the carriage, seated directly next to Princess Impostor (as I’d come to think of her) for the two hours it took to reach the ruined monastery, I caught myself twisting the ring around my finger several times to ease my nervousness. Meanwhile, the “princess” seemed quite at ease, flashing calm, confident smiles to both me and my parents who accompanied us on the drive. If she was concerned about either her upcoming task or revealing her true identity, she masked it well.

“Your seamstress—Orlyss, is that right?—has outdone herself for today’s test,” the young woman said. She ran a gloved hand across the lavender silk organza cascading across her lap into a skirt that was just shy of being full enough to make the carriage feel cramped. “I always thought lavender was one of my best colors.”

I didn’t know much about women’s fashion, but even I was impressed that Orlyss had managed to create a dress so elaborate and flattering in such a short time. I could already imagine how Princess Impostor would look as she stood over the ruins. The crystal-encrusted floral details blooming out of

the bodice would soon have her glowing like a bouquet of flaming lilacs, gleaming with magic and the afternoon sun.

Mother smiled. “I’m pleased that she has met your expectations. I shall pass on your compliments the next time I see her.”

“It is quite becoming on you,” I agreed, admiring how it seemed to fit her flawless elegance. Dark, glossy curls burst from a delicate tiara with just enough framing her face to highlight her prominent cheekbones. Yes, I was highly suspicious of this alleged princess, but considering that I was supposed to be forging a marriage alliance with her, allowing myself to express appreciation of her beauty was not only allowed, but expected.

However, I did have to steel myself against the stunning smile she turned on me. I couldn’t afford to become caught in her spell without knowing her true identity. “Thank you, Prince Aiendir,” she purred. “You look quite handsome yourself. And isn’t it so charming how they matched us so tastefully?”

Ah, yes. That had to have been my mother’s doing. “Thank you,” I said through my smile, which was now a bit forced. “Yes, absolutely charming.” My soft grey tunic with lavender embroidery and short grey cape with a wide band of lavender running along the edge was clearly meant as an encouraging symbol to our people that Princess Iloma and I were a perfect and secure match for one another.

I knew I should’ve used my time in the carriage with the princess to my advantage, asking strategic questions to draw out more clues about her true identity, but there was something about sitting next to her that seemed to drain me of all cleverness. Being under my parents’ eyes while Mother was

not so subtly mourning my lack of conversation skills clearly didn't help. Fortunately, Mother engaged her in a lively discussion following the theme of fashion, giving me the chance to observe this perfectly poised stranger and the ease with which she held herself, even while under the scrutiny of an imposing monarch.

However, she did eventually turn her attention back to me. "So how many should I expect to be there to witness this test?" she asked with a perfectly raised eyebrow.

I offered my most apologetic smile. "A fair number, I'm afraid. Naturally, we had to invite the most important and powerful of magic users to ensure the safety of all involved, plus a handful of high-ranking officials to bear witness. And as you know, when you invite powerful and important Fae, the invitation list will inevitably grow to accommodate all those whom you cannot afford to offend."

Her delicate lips twitched with humor. "Naturally."

"It was nearly one hundred at last count, I believe," Father spoke up. He'd barely made a noise the entire trip, which was uncharacteristic for him, but I suppose he'd found the discussion on fashion about as stimulating as I had.

Princess Impostor raised an eyebrow. "That *is* quite a few. I hope your 'high-ranking officials' aren't being taken away from their important tasks all for my sake."

I forced a smile, but I wasn't sure how convincing it was. "Trust me. They have nothing better to do."

What I hadn't told her was that the "high-ranking officials" I'd mentioned were just as important to impress as my parents, if not moreso. It wasn't bad enough that my parents were disappointed in me, but nearly all the nobles and magicians

had also noticed their “ingenuous” prince. At least, that’s the diplomatic term they used for me, even though everyone knew they really meant I was naive, unsophisticated, and...well... gullible.

When we finally arrived in the foothills near the site, our caravan of carriages fanned out, some taking a few of the magicians to the far side of the ruins to serve as a magical boundary while others to the crests of nearby hills where they’d be able to observe the test from a safe distance. My parents and I disembarked along with Princess Impostor, and all four of us slipped our wing charms behind our necklines to rest against our skin, now that we were out of the cramped carriages and in full view of most of the highest-powered members of the court. Our wings burst into view in a rainbow of colors, and as I watched, similar vivid displays blossomed across the landscape as all the observers stepped from their carriages and activated their own wing charms.

Our chief magician Fainwyl approached us from where he’d ridden with Evla and her guard Riardel. Accompanying him was a brawny, red-haired representative from the Grand Council, Lord Ithuir. I felt my shoulders stiffen as I remembered what my parents had said about his animosity towards my father.

The chief magician greeted us with a small bow. “Princess Iloma,” Fainwyl practically hummed and gestured toward a footpath which led towards what was left of the monastery. “Shall we?”

Princess Impostor nodded politely in return and took his arm. They headed toward the ruins as my parents and I remained behind with Lord Ithuir. Fainwyl would provide her instructions on where the discarded debris should go and then

return to protect us should something go horribly wrong with the princess's spell.

As we watched them go, Lord Ithuir said, "I must say, this site looks worse than I expected."

I nodded in agreement, although I doubted he was paying any attention to me. It was worse than I'd imagined too. The monastery was partially submerged under so much rock and soil that it appeared as though half the mountain had migrated to reclaim what the monks had stolen from it.

My father's voice was stiff, yet slick as he replied, "We are unconcerned about Princess Iloma's ability to complete the task. This display is merely to satisfy you and the rest of the Grand Council. I can assure you she is powerful enough to prove her worth as a ruler."

"Let's hope she does," Lord Ithuir rumbled, "and that she considers Lianthir a worthy match. Moon knows Lianthir needs all the strength we can get at this point."

I clenched my jaw at the implication, but rather than acknowledge the conversation, I focused on Princess Impostor as she made her trek towards the ruins. Despite the muted colors in her dress that otherwise would've helped her blend into the rocky, grey landscape, the princess was clearly visible due to the crystals and beadwork glittering across her feathery gown. She was almost too bright to stare at, and yet I couldn't tear my eyes from her as my mind raced through the possibilities of what could happen.

I might not have known her identity, but it seemed fairly certain that she was *not* the Searonian princess. Was she from Lianthir? Was she a mixed-blood Fae? Or did she hail from a kingdom of purer heritage?

The only Lianthirans I'd ever known who were powerful enough to attempt such a feat were kept close to the palace in order to consolidate our power. The royal family had refrained from intermarrying with humans, as had most of the highest-ranking nobility. We knew the families with the most potent magical bloodlines intimately, and even if this "Iloma" was heavily glamoured, I was confident I would've recognized her if she'd been one of them. Any other Lianthiran Fae had a slim to non-existent chance at succeeding in this task.

Although this test was designed to gauge the strength of the princess's magic, I would also be using this to determine her heritage. If she succeeded, it would be almost certain that Princess Impostor was from any number of other Fae kingdoms. Considering that there were at least a half-dozen other kingdoms who could potentially be involved in such a scheme, that didn't narrow my search dramatically, but any clues would be welcome at this point.

In a swirl of blue and silver robes and matching wings, our chief magician spun our way and began a swift walk back in our direction. Meanwhile, the princess remained perfectly still, her back towards us as she faced the monastery ruins. My eyes traveled back and forth between the two of them, looking for a hint in either's body language for how they expected this test to go.

There was a tense silence between me and my parents which remained unbroken until the chief magician reached us and bowed. "Your Majesties," he greeted solemnly. "The princess is ready and may commence the task when she feels she's examined the energy field adequately."

Father nodded in return. "Thank you, Fainwyl. I expect it shall go well. Searon's magical bloodline is strong. There's no

reason this should be more than a formality.”

Mother leaned in towards me and kept her voice low so that only I would hear. “And when she passes this test, we’ll be one step closer to solidifying an alliance to protect us and build us up in the eyes of the entire realm.” She reached out and squeezed my arm in a way that any observers would think was encouraging, but which I knew was a warning to not blunder this arrangement.

Even so, I steeled my face against any emotion. With whispers of revolt in the air, I was very aware of everything riding on this relationship. That is, what would’ve been riding on it if she’d been the real Searonian princess.

Instead, I focused on the beautiful woman standing alone before the rubble. If I’d been closer, I presumably would’ve felt the electric mist of her magic as she surveyed the scene, but as distant as I was, I could merely watch her posture and wonder what was happening in her mind.

Then slowly, she raised her hands as though offering either a sacrifice or a comforting embrace. Shimmering waves of barely-there light flowed from her like thin tendrils of smoke, first as a trickle, then as a cascade, washing the landscape with what looked like a flood of starlight in fog form. The silvery magic swallowed up the rubble and burned so brightly that I finally had to turn away and shield my eyes.

An unnatural wind nearly knocked me off my feet before a shield, provided by Fainwyl, sprang up before my family and me. As I gazed past my left shoulder, I saw a shower of fine dust slip around the edge of the shield, carried by the magic-born wind currents off towards the plains behind us. A soft patter like a light rain accompanied the powdery shower, and it

took me a moment before I realized it was the sound of the dust hitting the shield before sliding off and around us.

It lasted only a moment and ended as quickly as it began. A gasp from my mother caused me to turn and take in the scene, wondering if something had gone horribly wrong. Was the fraudulent princess injured?

Instead, I saw the site where the monastery had stood, fully cleared without a stone left behind. The only sign that it had ever existed was a light layer of pulverized sand which stretched from the outer edges of the site to well behind us. Untouched pockets where magic shields had protected groups of onlookers remained free of the dust, as if a baker had removed some of his instruments from a floured surface after kneading bread dough.

The princess stood in the same spot, the only change being that she had lowered her arms at some point. She continued to face the site, and I wondered if she was evaluating her handiwork or was as shocked as I was that she'd so thoroughly obliterated the ruins.

Then without warning, she crumpled to the ground.

Chapter 4

The Shift in the Game



Ceris

I had never—not once in my entire life—used so much magic at once. And yet, as I stood before that immense pile of rubble, I forced myself to focus on the many times I’d used a simple spell to purge my bedding and wardrobe of impurities. It was a bit of a cumbersome spell and used quite a bit of magic (for a Lianthiran Fae), but on cold, wintry days, I couldn’t bring myself to face the bitter cold water just to wash my laundry by hand.

But instead of particles of dust and dirt, I was looking at clearing away boulders and earth. Would the same spell work? How much power would I have to put behind it? Probably more than I had, right? How much would I have to clear away before they’d consider the test passed?

For the first time in my life, after speaking the spell, I didn’t use any careful mental sculpting and guidance, but rather just let whatever magic I could reach pour through me unhindered. And the force behind the magical surge that ripped through me took my breath away. Where was this magic coming from? Had I always had it?

I was blinded by magic; I couldn’t even feel whether my feet were still under me or if I was rightside-up. Everything

within me and through me and around me was silver-white magic that raged and swallowed me. I felt fire in my brain, but although it burned bright and furious, it caused me no pain.

And then just as soon as it started, it was all over. It took several seconds for my eyes to adjust and to regain sensation in my knees which wobbled alarmingly below me. I was dreading the sight of the ruins, sure I'd failed the test despite giving everything I had. How much was left behind?

I only had a heartbeat or two to view the area before the ground rushed up to meet me in a blissful slumber of exhaustion. But the last sight I had before I collapsed was of a truly unrecognizable plain before me. I'd blasted everything away. All of it. But only the barest hint of amazement and confusion started to trickle in before everything went dark.

I don't even know how I made it back to the palace, but I awoke in my now-familiar bed with no one around except an attendant I'd seen a couple times around the castle. Physically speaking, I felt as though I'd just had an excellent night's sleep, not collapsed from bearing a magical weight I wasn't accustomed to. The only telltale sign that something was off was that my brain felt strange around the edges, like fuzzy lightning, not all that dissimilar from the needle-like feelings I got after sitting with my ankles crossed for too long.

The attendant—a Fae with loose brown curls and a sharp chin—stood and said with a slight bow, “I'm delighted to see you are awake, Your Highness. There were several who wished to be here when you awakened, but we all expected you to be asleep longer. I'll go alert them now.” Then she scuttled out of the room before waiting to hear anything from me.

I settled back into my pillow to try to reflect on what had happened at the destruction site, but less than a minute after the attendant disappeared, Evla soared into the room with a triumphant grin on her face. “I knew you were the right choice!” she crowed. “You just eliminated all potential doubt around your heritage. Look, I even brought you Alfonso’s street tacos to celebrate.”

I blinked in surprise but graciously accepted the tacos. “The attendant must’ve found you fast.”

Evla rolled her eyes. “I set a charm on this room to let me know when you woke up. The King and Queen are too scrupulous to do such a thing—an ‘invasion of privacy,’ they’d call it—but you and I are old friends. I figured we were close enough you wouldn’t be offended.”

“You thought wrong,” I growled in between delectable bites of shredded meat and onions, but Evla ignored me.

“I know they’re planning on at least one more test, possibly two,” she forged ahead, starting to pace as she thought aloud, “but there can be no doubt in their mind that you are Princess Iloma. I know you doubted your own power, Ceris, but I had a feeling you were stronger than you knew. To think we are so close to—”

“Evla.”

I spoke her name softly but with all the ice and darkness I could muster, and it worked. Evla immediately paused in her babbling and pacing and slowly turned her face to look at me. I refused to allow the smile that threatened to surface at the pleasure I felt knowing that I had the power to halt even a pure-blood royal Fae in her tracks.

“Evla,” I said again, this time in a slightly sweeter tone, “how are you getting me out of this? I can’t marry the prince. I need to get back to my trafficking work. I didn’t agree to any of this, and I’ve been far too patient with you already. You still haven’t given me an answer on how you’re getting me out of this scheme of yours.”

A smug smile I’d grown to hate spread across Evla’s face. “Why can’t you marry the prince? You may want us to believe that it’s all about the money for you, but I know you’re passionate about your work, smuggling in the potions and elixirs required by so many sick and cursed Fae.”

My jaw tightened against my will as Evla positively *strutted* towards my bed. “Did it ever occur to you,” she said in a painfully slow tempo, “that if you *did* marry the prince, you could be an influential force in getting the laws changed to provide access to those medicines for all of Lianthir? Did you ever imagine that you could help those unfortunate, vulnerable souls gain the potions they need through *legal* means? I can think of no one else who would be better at negotiating trading laws with the various monarchs of the realm.”

I felt Evla’s words hit me like a rampaging chimera. She really did expect me to marry Prince Aiendir, didn’t she? Did she ever create an exit plan for this charade of hers? I mean, she had a good point (which I could never admit to her) about the influence I might possibly have to make medicinal smugglers like myself unnecessary, but to *marry a prince* and spend my entire future in a lie to make it happen?

The ugly truth was that medicinal traffickers like myself only became necessary a couple generations ago when apothecaries with enough magic to make effective, potent medications became a rarity. The potions needed to aid a

dangerous pregnancy, fight infection after a grievous wound, or cure those battling a blood curse became harder and harder to procure within our borders.

Unfortunately, that's when the crown had slammed the door on medical imports, afraid that our reliance on other Fae nations for our elixirs and medicines would signal our magical poverty and serve as blood in the water to our power-hungry neighbors. Sneakier methods of acquiring the needed medicines were suddenly our only option, and that's where we medical traffickers came in. Fortunately, there were several smaller nations who were more than happy to take our Lianthiran gold, most notably the Sidhe, who'd had their own dealings with the human realm centuries ago. They'd eventually recovered their magic, just as we hoped to do, but the political fallout still plagued them, which is likely why our current leaders were so eager to hide our vulnerabilities.

I opened my mouth to reply to Evla, but she held up a warning hand and cocked her head to listen. I clamped my lips together so quickly that my jaw ached, and tucked my tacos out of sight behind a pillow.

We were soon joined by the prince himself. His expression didn't change as he entered the room, but the slight flicker in his eyes between me and Evla showed that he was just as surprised to see her in my room as I had been moments before. His eyes settled back on me, and he gave a slight nod. "Your Highness."

I offered him a warm smile, but I cocked one playful eyebrow. "Prince Aiildir, how kind of you to visit me after my *second* dramatic collapse since I've arrived in your kingdom. You must think my parents deceived you when they described

my strength and value as your potential bride and nation's queen."

The smile that burst across the prince's face was dazzling and rather...un-Fae-like. It caught me by such surprise that I nearly gasped like a lovestruck maiden. Men with enough magic to maintain such a fine glamour were always too Fae to display unguarded emotion. And yet there was no hint of guile or restraint upon the prince's beaming countenance.

"Not at all," he said, his voice reflecting genuine pleasure. "We merely asked you to move the debris out of the way, not obliterate it. When we asked the healers if you'd be up to the test, we had a much less strenuous task in mind. You went above and beyond, and it's not surprising you stretched yourself beyond what you and your magic were ready for."

Relief fluttered briefly in my chest. I'd been afraid to think about how my collapse might've been perceived by the observers. "I'm glad you and your family are so understanding."

The prince's smile softened as a hint of concern crinkled at the corner of his midnight-blue eyes. "Princess Iloma, if there was any doubt in your mind that you passed the test, then let me put that to rest immediately. My parents as well as our court and royal magicians were more than pleased with your accomplishment."

I froze, suddenly unsure how to reply. That was quite a foreign sensation to me, but I was encountering an entirely different person than the prince I'd expected. There'd always been rumors that despite his pure-blood heritage, Prince Aieldir lacked the ruthless cunning necessary to be a strong player on the international stage and go toe-to-toe with other royal Fae, but I hadn't expected someone so...well...*soft*.

“I am glad I have met your expectations, Your Highness,” I said slowly. “We Searonians pride ourselves on being strong magicians. I know you are seeking a powerful bride, and I am also tasked with determining whether this is a worthy alliance for us as well. And I must say that from what I’ve seen, I am hopeful.”

As I watched, Prince Aiendir’s dark eyes glittered with pleasure and something that resembled curiosity. It seemed right to be encouraging our relationship while posing as his potential bride, but I now wondered if I’d gone too far. A growing need to hear his reply gripped me in a way I didn’t entirely understand.

Unfortunately, the sharp-chinned attendant from earlier scurried back into the room at that moment and announced the arrival of the king and queen. Prince Aiendir and I turned to face them as they entered, wearing wings again, as seemed to be their custom despite the impracticality of them. At least this time, they were less than half the size of their previous cream-colored wings, but twice as elaborate, marbled with blues, golds, greens, and other colors that reminded me of sunlight on rippling rivers.

As the royal couple sailed effortlessly into the room as though floating instead of walking, their faces full of well-controlled satisfaction, I found myself despising them for their timing. Still, I smoothed all traces of emotion from my face and shut the door on the questioning part of my brain that so desperately wanted to understand the prince and his motives.

“Princess Iloma,” King Ildemar began with a slow, shallow bow, “I would like to express my deep admiration for the magical display you gave us today. Your powers were awe-inspiring and delightful to behold.”

“Indeed,” Queen Eirlyss chirped. “The level of finesse in how you handled the debris was truly remarkable. Truly, you are a woman of great strength and would make an excellent queen of Lianthir.” A glance at her son accompanied that last statement, a motion that—though subtle—was meant to draw my eyes towards him.

I graciously obliged, expecting to see him standing at attention towards his parents with the same controlled, refined expression I so carefully held. Instead, I found him staring at me as though I were a twisted knot he was determined to untie. I could see his intelligence in the set of his eyebrows and the tautness of his mouth as he seemed to calculate me in a mildly unnerving manner.

Before the first test, Prince Aiendir had visited me as I lay in my sickbed several times, and although his visits had always been cordial, they’d been primarily full of stilted, uninteresting small talk. The man who stood before me today was someone new, someone less restrained, and I suddenly felt vulnerable under his gaze. What was it about this first test that had changed his attitude and behavior towards me?

I was so caught up in my pondering of the prince that I nearly missed the queen saying, “So my understanding is that although you collapsed at the site, no long-term damage was sustained? Both a healer and a court magician assured me that after a few hours’ rest, you would be fine. Obviously, what happened today is proof that you need longer to recover before you can attempt the second test, but surely you’d be up for joining us for dinner in the private dining hall?”

“Yes, we certainly hope you will,” the king chimed in. “We’ve put off getting to know you long enough.”

This time, it was his turn to glance meaningfully over at his son, obviously expecting him to encourage the invitation as well. But Aiendir's expression was an odd mixture of amusement and apology. It was no secret to anyone present that "getting to know" each other truly meant sizing one another up on the social and political level. They'd already begun weighing me on my magical abilities. Now they wanted an additional opportunity to judge me on charisma and verbal gymnastics, both of which I was much more confident in than I was in magic.

"Your Majesties, I would be delighted," I purred.

To my mild surprise, Prince Aiendir was the one to bow to my response. "Princess Iloma, we will be honored to host you this evening. And now, if you please excuse us, we have arrangements we have to see to."

"It's true," the Queen said with an apologetic nod. "King Ildemar here will have to make some adjustments to your next test, and he must see to those right away. Aiendir has been tasked with rescheduling the reception we had planned to celebrate your visit since you were recovering from your dreadful shipwreck at the time, and I believe he has a meeting with the steward before dinner. And I must make some minor changes to our dinner plans now that you've confirmed you will join us."

"However, after dinner this evening, I would be delighted if you'd join me for a walk about the castle," Prince Aiendir inserted. "You never did get the tour we had planned upon your arrival. But I imagine if you felt well enough that a mere four hours ago you were able to turn a few acres of rubble into a fine dust, you've recovered enough to handle a leisurely stroll."

I summoned my most serene smile and tilted my head in acceptance. “I would gladly accept your invitation. I look forward to it, Prince Aiendir. And of course, I perfectly understand that you all must tend to your responsibilities. I shall see you after my attendant helps me get ready for dinner.”

With further bowing and niceties, the three royals slowly made their way out the door, and Evla, whom I had forgotten was there since her relatives hadn’t acknowledged her, followed them out with a quick wink back at me. I scowled back and shook my head at her, but she seemed entirely unbothered.

Watching them leave, my rebellious heart briefly gave me a glimpse at what a royal marriage to the impossibly handsome and sharp-minded prince could look like. In a fit of logic, I quickly stamped out that mental image. The only reason I’d even imagined that for a moment was because Evla dangled the idea of how much influence I could have if I became queen. But there was still the obstacle of maintaining a life-long lie to overcome, let alone having to commit to a lifestyle I had no interest in.

Traditionally, Fae rarely married for love. Marriage was too useful a tool in the game for power and influence to be wasted on something as trivial as love. However, the custom of politically strategic marriages had been shaken by the creation of the human portal, especially among the lower classes of Fae.

Abandoning that custom had been our downfall. As Fae married humans out of so-called “love,” it wasn’t just our magic that had suffered. As a nation, Lianthir had softened and lost too much of our craftiness in favor of the human values of

honor and compassion. I personally agreed with the royals and other nobles; if we were going to survive as a nation and stand up against the more powerful Fae kingdoms and their traditional values, we needed to restore our bloodline, starting with enforcing the age-old tradition of politically-based marriages.

Exactly, snaked a voice—which sounded suspiciously like Evla—through my brain. *You’ve already proven to yourself and others through today’s test that you are more powerful than the majority of Lianthiran Fae, and you certainly have no shortage of trickery. Why couldn’t you be an advantageous match to Prince Aiildir?*

As goosebumps popped up along my arms, the voice continued, *And aren’t you also interested in him for your own agenda? One which has nothing to do with his dashing looks and unusual charm? Using one another for your own diplomatic purposes is perfectly in line with your values.*

I frowned at that. It sounded too much like my subconscious trying to justify pursuing a handsome prince while also conveniently avoiding the need for an escape plan out of this predicament Evla put me in. After all, I wasn’t having any luck figuring my way out of this mess without risking everything I’d been working for the last few years—not to mention the very real possibility of imprisonment or *worse* for my smuggling crimes—so simply continuing the ruse was rather tempting.

Still, my previous thoughts, while unwelcome, gave me something interesting to think about.

In fact, I would’ve pondered the matter longer, but a chipper voice suddenly interrupted my thoughts. “Good

evening, Your Highness. It's time for us to dress you for dinner."

Aieldir

"I WONDER..." Princess Imposter tapped the corner of her sunrise-pink lips with one delicate finger before taking a breath and beginning again. "I wonder, dear Prince Aieldir, which of these fine monarchs you would consider yourself most like? Whose reign do you think you're most likely to emulate once you are King of Lianthir?"

As we neared the end of our post-dinner tour, I found myself suddenly unable to breathe as I gazed across the portrait gallery and tried to keep the panic off my face. The truth was that I felt like I had nothing in common with the kings and queens of the past. I knew all their names, their faces, their stories, but quite honestly, they felt like strangers.

"I'd say perhaps Queen Adsel," I lied, gesturing to a portrait of a fair wisp of a Fae whose eyes were a contrasting sharp darkness. "The kingdom had relative peace during her time, at least militarily speaking, but she was extremely shrewd in her dealings, both financial and otherwise. She tripled the amount of gold in the royal treasury during her 16-year reign."

A twitch at the corner of Princess Impostor's mouth threatened to suggest she was amused. "Yes, I've heard of Queen Adsel. She was also the queen who exiled her own spouse when she caught him admiring another woman *and* had her own son executed for treason, was she not?"

Thistles and thorns, I'd forgotten that, I silently fumed. But I chose to cover my frustration with a smirk. "Yes, and

perhaps that ought to be a lesson to you, should you become my queen. Keep that in mind, Princess Iloma.”

A gleam of respect lit up her countenance. Yes, if her display of magic at the monastery ruins hadn't been enough to convince me that she hailed from a powerful Fae kingdom, her talent for and appreciation of duplicity certainly was.

She glanced back at our attendants (chaperones, really) who had hung far enough back to give us the space to converse privately. “I do appreciate this after-dinner tour. Your parents are agreeable enough, but it seems only right that we get to know one another better.”

As we left the portrait hall behind us, Princess Impostor threaded her arm through mine and rested her opposite hand on my bicep. I steeled my face against any expression of my surprise. We'd never been so intimate with one another before—truthfully, I'd never been this intimate with *any* maiden—and this unexpected familiarity filled me with a sensation I couldn't quite identify.

Dinner with her had turned out to be...surprisingly pleasant. Not that she'd ever been anything but charming and poised, but now that the first task was over with, it seemed that her sharp, almost overly-polished edge had dulled a bit. There was a more natural feel to the conversation as she had asked questions about Lianthir, which my parents leaped over one another to answer in the most boastful tones imaginable.

On more than one occasion, I'd glanced from my parents or whichever course I was currently picking at over to my potential bride and caught her looking back at me. With each glance, her eyes had been just as carefully guarded as every other time since she'd arrived at the castle, but there was a subtle difference. On this night, she'd allowed a hint of

curiosity through those sparkling windows, as though trying to subtly ask me to explain myself rather than pry outright.

That look unsettled me. What had I done to earn such an expression? Did she learn something about me? Surely she hadn't discovered our deepest secrets, the ones we'd painstakingly—and *successfully*—hidden for decades? The mushroom galette I'd eagerly savored just moments before turned in my stomach at the thought.

It was the same look she gave me now as I slowed my steps, wondering if I ought to take her to the next place my feet had naturally wanted to go. I reluctantly met those probing eyes with uncertainty. "This may be strange," I said slowly, "but it's one of my favorite places on the grounds and one rarely shown to visitors."

One of Princess Impostor's artful eyebrows raised ever so slightly. "I'm intrigued."

"We have our floral gardens with all the fountains and the footpaths and the scenic views. Those are designed to impress and be enjoyed by our guests, but there's another garden I prefer. It's...simpler." Without thinking about it, I covered the hand she had resting on my arm with my free hand. Her soft warmth flowed into me, but I tried to ignore it.

"It's the herb and medicinal garden," I explained. "The scent of the floral gardens always makes me feel like I'm stuck in a perfume shop, but the herb garden just feels clean. I suppose it's the spearmint and the tea leaves, even the aloe. But we'd have to go through the healing ward to get there."

She cocked her head at me. "You have a healing ward? But I was tended to in my room."

I nodded. “Yes, but you were well enough to be transported upstairs and didn’t have to have near-constant supervision. We have a ground-level ward where our healers and their supplies are stationed. There are beds for those for whom taking them upstairs to the guest rooms would be difficult or dangerous, or even if someone would need more intense observation and quick access to medicines.”

There was a pause before Princess Impostor answered, and I began to get a sinking sensation that I’d made her immediately realize I was too weak and...well...*strange* to marry. *But wait*, I reminded myself. *She’s not the real princess, so I don’t care if she wants to marry me or not. Really, I don’t.*

“I would love to see your healing ward,” she replied softly. And somehow, I got the feeling that it was the most genuine thing she’d said since she’d arrived.

“Perfect. It’s just around the corner here.”

My thumb traced along the edges of her left hand, which she still held against my bicep, as I led her down a corridor to our left and through the double doors to the healing ward. “It’s not much once we’re first inside, just a half-dozen beds here, but to get to the herb and medicinal garden, we’ll pass a few slightly more interesting areas.”

I released her hand and gestured to a small door towards the back of the healing ward. “That leads towards the healers’ personal rooms as well as their offices. The garden, however, is this way,” I said as I led her through a door on the opposite wall. “But first, on your left, is the pharmacy, where they bring the ingredients for mixing various elixirs and poultices.”

There was a heavy pause before Princess Impostor replied. “They mix their own medicines right here in the castle?” she asked, a curious hardness in her tone.

Aware that this was a significant clue to understanding the fake princess, I paused and turned to look at her with a raised eyebrow. “They do. How do you handle medicine for the palace in Searon?”

When she blinked, I could almost see the lie settle about her comfortably, even though she surely hadn’t thought this through in advance. She was *that* good. “We have a separate building on the castle grounds for all healing purposes. I haven’t spent much time in it, but I always assumed they sourced their medicines from local apothecary’s shops.”

I nodded. “They might.” Her ease at deception stirred up an unnerving suspicion in the back of my brain, wondering whether her ruse might somehow be tied with the shady whispers of a future coup, but I had to keep up pretenses until I had more to go on, so I continued: “Of course, in Searon, your magic—and therefore your herbs and medicines and elixirs—is all more powerful and accessible. Here in Lianthir, quality medicines and ingredients are harder to find. My parents like to ensure that we have control over the best supplies in the kingdom.”

There was a hint of unexpected ice in her voice when Princess Impostor replied, “I see.”

Her tone puzzled me, but I led her a few more steps to a large window where we paused again. “Now there are layers of magical wards here protecting what’s beyond this window, but I think I can...”

I reached out a hand and touched the glass, and a wisp of my magic slipped its way through the woven blankets of spells to light up the room beyond. “Here. Our medical stores. This room is filled with magic to stabilize all these potions,

poultices, elixirs, salves, and everything else you can think of.”

Much to my surprise, it seemed like a mask fell from my companion’s face. Her jaw went slack, and her hands reached out in an air of respect to touch the glass window. The woman before me still had no name besides the fake one she’d given me, but in that moment, I felt uncomfortable, like I’d stolen a glimpse of her heart.

“This is amazing!” she whispered. “I can see bear pox salve, bone-grow elixir, stonefire burn balm, and—” The hand that flew to her mouth was too late to mute the squeal she made. “Does that label read, ‘heart shadow elixir’? Oh, and there’s basilisk antivenom! You truly have the newest medicines known to Fae-kind.”

“I—I had no idea,” I stammered. There was nothing more I knew to say. I felt this faux princess was giving me significant clues to her identity, but I couldn’t begin to unravel it. Was she an apothecary? Was Evla seeking medical help from outside the castle because she didn’t want our healers to know something about her health?

With a sharp breath, the Princess Impostor composed herself. “So sorry,” she said, her voice prim as a crystal tea set once more. “I often thought if I wasn’t already a princess, I might’ve gone into the healing arts. Now did you say the herb garden was this way?”

“Yes, through these doors,” I assured her as I extinguished the light in the storage room and pushed open the heavy exterior doors. A thought pestered me at the back of my mind that maybe she’d get excited and drop her act again once she saw the herbs, but I squashed that down instantly.

I breathed deep to inhale the green scent of chamomile, hyssop, lavender, and more I could never hope to identify. Once my senses were flooded, I formed an orb of light magic to brighten up the area since the sun had nearly set and cast a look to see the unnamed woman's reaction. This time, she managed to remain poised and serene, but there was still a glittering in her eyes as she surveyed the rows upon rows of plants.

To my slight annoyance, I saw the attendants slip outside after us. They'd been so quiet and respectful about keeping their distance that I'd nearly forgotten they were there.

"So we're in a greenhouse?" the Princess Impostor asked, glancing up at the myriad panels of glass above us.

"Yes. But the garden stretches far beyond the greenhouse, and plants are rotated in and out as needed for their ideal growing specifications." When she looked at me, I gave her a sheepish look. "But please don't ask me more because I'm hopelessly ignorant beyond that."

She nodded. "I can see why you like it here. It's peaceful and green without being showy." As she took a few steps beyond me and into the greenery, I couldn't help but notice that although her enthusiasm hadn't bubbled up again, she seemed more relaxed than I'd ever seen her. "Just standing here, you can tell these are meant for healing," she continued in a voice that made me wonder if she was aware that she was speaking out loud, "and that's even before they're harvested and mixed into remedies that could help hundreds, or probably thousands, of your citizens."

Forever a failure when it came to masking my emotions, I smiled at the back of her head. She really did get it. But more importantly, I was able to discern that she had a heart to help

and to heal. At that moment, I no longer suspected her of malice towards anyone. Whoever she was, whatever her purpose, her heart was bent toward the good of the Lianthiran Fae.

And a small part of me began to regret that she wasn't Princess Iloma.

I cleared my throat. "Well, I'm certain it's been a long day. It's hard to believe that just this morning we made the trek out to the foothills and you completely leveled the ruins. I'm sure you still need to rest, and it was thoughtless of me to keep you out this long."

"To be fair, I did take a long nap in the middle of the day," she said. "But yes, I suppose you're right. I should probably head back to my room to rest."

The attendants ducked out of my path as I headed back to the double doors leading into the healing ward. Once we'd made it back to the corridor beyond, I wondered if she'd take my arm again. When she didn't, I began to panic and forget all my etiquette training. Was I supposed to offer my arm to her?

Instead, we walked awkwardly side-by-side back to her room. She tried to make some pleasant talk, mostly comparing the decorative styles in our castle to theirs in Searon, but I was distracted by wondering whether I'd committed some social blunder by not offering my arm and wondering if it was too late to do so now. Would she think me rude for not doing so, or awkward for waiting so long?

But before I knew it, we were at her door, and I was bidding her a restful night. "I do hope you sleep well," I breathed. "I've exhausted my magic before like you did today, and it can take a day or two to feel back to normal."

“Your concern is gracious, but I already feel better than I expected to,” she replied with a warm smile, but I was unsure if it was genuine or a well-practiced diplomatic expression. “I hope you sleep well yourself. And I really did enjoy the tour, especially the herb garden.”

“My pleasure. I enjoyed myself as well,” I said.

And that’s when an even wilder panic struck. What was I supposed to do now? I knew that falling for someone whose identity I didn’t know—but who was clearly trying to deceive me—was absolutely a terrible idea.

But was I expected to kiss her? We were very nearly engaged; everything from here on out was sheer formality. It seemed like it would be within prescribed custom, but just how dangerous would it be to kiss this beautiful, mysterious fraud?

“I suppose I should be heading back to my room now,” I said, inwardly cringing at my inability to speak a charming farewell. I settled on taking her hand and kissing her knuckles—a good happy medium, I figured. “Good night, Princess Iloma.”

She gave a small curtsy, and as she pulled her hand away, I felt an unexpected sense of loss. “Good night, Prince Aiildir,” she said before disappearing into her room.

The trek back to my own room wasn’t long but it was full of mental examination of the evening, wondering who this unknown woman was and what impression I’d given her of myself. I was so distracted when I entered my suite that it took me a moment to realize that someone had drawn the drapes and made the room completely black.

Before I could light a magic orb, a hand grabbed my wrist and spun me into a chair which knocked my legs out from under me and forced me to sit down hard.

“Loethar,” I growled, having recognized his signature move.

Candles scattered around the room burst into flames, illuminating my friend’s face. “Greetings, my lord! I have the news you’ve been searching for. And let me tell you, that potential wife of yours is one tricky lady. To be honest, there are still things about her story that puzzle me.”

My mouth went dry. We had a name? “Who is she?” I coughed out.

Loethar grinned wildly. “Her name is Ceris. She’s an assistant to Emesyl, the horse trainer we’ve been keeping an eye on for quite some time. We’ve been suspecting him of being involved in a medicinal trafficking ring, but we’ve yet to nail down anything concrete on him. He’s *that* slippery.

“But even *more* impressive,” Loethar continued, his eyes turning downright fiery, “is that when we originally investigated Ceris, she came back so squeaky clean that we ruled her out as having any part of his schemes. Now that we know just how talented she is—how she’s convinced the entire royal court that she’s Princess Iloma of Searon—I think it’s fair to say we misjudged her and need to take a second look.”

Ceris. Her name was Ceris. She was a horse trainer’s assistant...and medical smuggler? Well, at least that made sense now. And she was from Lianthir—therefore quite certainly of mixed heritage, since she wasn’t a noble—and somehow had enough magic to clear away debris from an entire landslide. But what were she and Evla doing? Generally speaking, I trusted Evla to do what was right by our family and

our kingdom when it counted, but this scheme was just bizarre. To say it was a lot to process was an understatement. All I could do for a moment was stare at the floor.

“Don’t say anything,” I said to Loethar. “Keep everything you’ve found out quiet.”

There was an awkward pause. “You mean...I don’t get to tell the king and queen?” he practically whined.

I shook my head. “No. Not yet. I need to figure out what to do with this information.”

There was another pause before Loethar spoke up rather stiffly. “Yes, Your Highness. Is there anything else I can do for you at this time?”

I took a deep breath. “Not at this time. Thank you, Loethar. That was incredibly helpful, and you’ve been a great friend for doing this for me.”

Loethar bowed. “Of course. You can count on me for anything, Aiendir. I’m your man.”

The scout spun on his heel and marched to the door. When his hand touched the knob, he turned and looked at me one more time. “She’s that spectacular, huh?”

I blinked at him in surprise, and I wasn’t sure how to answer. “I don’t know yet,” I finally admitted.

He nodded with a surprising amount of understanding in his eyes, and left me to ponder my options. The way I saw it, I had three choices.

I could reveal her identity.

I could wait and see how long it took her to reveal it herself.

Or I could help her.

Chapter 5

The Second Test



Ceris

By the morning after my first trial, I felt I was back to normal. As my attendant helped me dress and fix my hair, I mulled over how surprised I was to have recovered so quickly. I mentally prodded at my magic channels, where only yesterday wild power had ripped through me with breath-stopping violence, and I was filled with awe at how they seemed unscathed in the slightest.

“They say these ‘illusion necklines’ are quite the trend right now in Searon, so I’m glad our seamstress was able to replicate a familiar style for you,” said the sharp-chinned attendant, whose name I’d learned last night was Rorlyn, as she fastened the single button behind my neck and tied my belt at the back.

I was certainly not about to admit out loud that I’d never seen anything like it since clearly the true Iloma would have, but I did admire it. The sage green satin pleated bodice only rose up just high enough to be considered tasteful before it gave way to a fine mesh close to my natural skin tone that stretched to the tips of my shoulders and was adorned with green floral appliqué. Below the waist, the satin gave way to a

flowing organza, I marveled at how the light fabric rippled at even my slightest of movements.

As a smuggler, I'd worn many disguises. I'd impersonated bards, diplomats, a fair number of jewelers—even a pixie once!—but even in my finest of costumes, I'd never worn anything so well-crafted. I had to resist the urge to spin just to see what the fabric would look like floating and billowing through the air.

But maybe a breeze on a walk would suffice...

“Rorlyn,” I sang, “it looks so sunny outside that I'm not sure I could bear being cooped up in this room a minute longer. We have time before breakfast, don't we?”

Rorlyn looked absolutely delighted at the suggestion. “We do, Your Highness!” she chirped and rushed to hold the door open for me.

I led the way through the castle, but I didn't take the most direct path to the gardens. Instead, I found myself drawn to the corridor which ran past the healing ward and the portrait hall. I slowed my pace, not sure what I was hoping for as I drifted past the door, but I pictured the wealth of medicines inside.

How many hundreds of aethline could I get for smuggling all that out? I wondered. Of course, I was a smuggler, not a thief. Although I knew a few thieves who would probably be willing to take on such a job: if it weren't for the web of magical wards protecting the loot anyway.

And of course, it was the medicines and the wealth they promised that lured me to the healing ward and *not* the memory of the unusual prince who'd led me there the night before. Even though he'd been just as delighted by the plants in the herb and medicinal garden as I had been, it was pretty

clear that for him, it wasn't due to the black market value they held, but rather an intrinsic worth. Still, while we'd been together in the garden, standing so close to one another that I'd felt his warmth surrounding me, I couldn't help but see through his eyes the beauty and wildness of the earthy plants, even if just for a brief moment.

As Fae, we were supposed to be inextricably bound up in the natural world. In fact, our ancestors had originally organized themselves by seasons, and everything revolved around how their "courts" (as they called them then) contributed to the yearly cycle.

Then in our struggle against one another for power, our political games became more important than our original purpose, and our courts dissolved into kingdoms. We turned the plants we once nourished into status symbols, and they became part of our power plays. The main gardens were a perfect example of that. We'd taken nature and used it to cultivate an image we meant to reflect our own ideals, sort of like an external glamour.

Perhaps that's what it was that drew Prince Aiendir to the herb garden. What if he longed for the rawness of untamed nature and, by extension, an unclinking of the Fae? For a pureblood Fae, he had an openness about him that I never would've expected from a noble, let alone a prince. Perhaps he had a desire to reach beyond the masks and—

"Princess Iloma, is everything all right?" Rorlyn asked.

I blinked. I hadn't even noticed that I'd ceased walking and stood frozen in front of the doors to the healing ward.

"Yes, just fine," I huffed and took up a pace that had the attendant scrambling to keep up.

When I turned the elaborately carved, green-hued copper rose that served as a doorknob and pushed my way out the heavy door into the gardens, the scent of roses, gardenias, freesias, and more (including many flowers well out of season) greeted me. The vibrant colors were cheerful and inviting, but after the genuineness of the herb garden that seemed to stir something wild and ancient in me, these showy blossoms now seemed contrived.

There were several sandstone paths of a muted terracotta color branching from where I stood, and I chose one at random. The garden was empty and peaceful, so quiet that I could hear the not-too-distant breaking of the waves against the shore and the watery slapping of the docked ships. The haunting song of a seasmoke bird drifted down from above me as I admired how my organza skirt danced on the breeze, just like I'd imagined.

"The palace grounds cover nearly fifty acres, and you happen to walk right up to my favorite bench," a familiar voice said.

I spun to see Prince Aieldir seated on a bench that appeared to be made of bronze branches and vines so lifelike I had to look twice. As I'd been gazing out towards the ocean, I'd nearly walked right past the prince without noticing him.

He leaned forward and fixed me with a curious stare. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were looking for me, Princess Iloma."

For a moment, I was caught between feelings. Was I pleased to see him, or annoyed? "I was looking for tranquility, but it seems luck wasn't on my side," I replied, but I gave him a playful smile. After all, flirtation was not only expected, but encouraged for a princess and her potential bridegroom.

He slid to one side, leaving just enough room for me and my voluminous organza gown. Patting the spot next to him, he said, “Why don’t you come tell me more about the Searonian palace? I know yours is situated in the forest, and you mentioned last night that there’s a great deal of green and natural woodwork as opposed to our white marble and gold embellishments.”

I nodded, grateful that Evla had prepared me well for these types of questions. Still, the prince’s eyes were narrowed in scrutiny, assuring me that this was no idle question. “The palace is twisting and winds around the trees for the most part, but some of the larger trees are incorporated into the castle, their trunks running through floors and ceilings and their canopies stretching out above the roofs.”

Judging by his expression, Aiendir couldn’t fault my answer, but there was still an uneasy tension in his gaze. “And there’s a waterway, right?”

“A river,” I confirmed, suddenly wondering what the food was like in the Prisoner’s Tower. “There’s a tall, narrow waterfall that runs down the cliff just beyond the palace walls and provides a stunning backdrop for the castle, and the river runs through the grounds. When the castle was built a few centuries ago, they built the public portion of the castle with all the ballrooms and more intimate parlors directly over the river and installed many floor-to-ceiling windows throughout that wing.”

The look Prince Aiendir gave me was so sly, so very *Fae* that it confirmed that he’d asked those questions to test me, and somehow I’d failed. He leaned closer to me, sliding an arm across the back of the bench behind me, and I felt my breath catch at his nearness. “You are truly the paragon of *Fae*

values, Princess Iloma,” he purred in my ear. “All beauty and deceit and not a hint of the lowly mixed-blood manners we’re used to in Lianthir. I bet you’ve never even met a human.”

There was a warning twisted and tangled up in his puzzling words, but my brain scrambled to find the right response. “You find me beautiful?” I prodded, trying to take a safe approach.

“Naturally,” he admitted with a slow nod. “And also quite mystifying. I’m trying to figure out your game.”

A flutter of panic threatened to crack my poise, but I was too good at what I did. I forced my heartbeat to remain steady as I asked, “Are you accusing me of something, Your Highness?” If he’d figured out who I was and looked into my history, I could be charged not only with impersonation of a royal, but potentially even trafficking charges.

His expression didn’t change, but a tilt of his head implied that he was intrigued. “Should I be?”

Danger. Get out of here. Retreat. Regroup. Find a new strategy, my brain needled me.

I stood and smoothed nonexistent wrinkles and dirt from my skirts. “Perhaps I should leave you to your suspicious daydreams then,” I snipped.

I tried to spin away towards my attendant who was probably a hair farther away than propriety would normally dictate, but the prince lashed out and grasped my wrist. Despite my training, a gasp escaped my throat as he pulled me back around and so close to him that I could feel the warmth from his breath against my temple as he simply said, “Ceris.”

Despite the heat he radiated, ice formed in my spine. I was found out. It was life in prison for me, and I didn’t even want

to think of what would happen to the smuggling ring and those who relied on us.

Curse that Evla and her terrible pre-planning skills! I fumed silently. I was furious that I'd let that incompetent strategist get me tangled up in her shoddy plot. *Why can't she leave conspiracies to the professionals? If I'm lucky, I'll be sent to a local prison instead of the prisoner's tower, but for the love of all things green and growing, please don't let royal impersonation be an execution-worthy charge!*

Slowly, I turned my face to meet his, determined not to let him see even a hint of the fear that churned in my insides. "Aiildir," I replied, not bothering to use his title for once. What was the point in holding up formalities anymore?

His voice was barely above a whisper, but his face was so close to mine that his breath stirred a few tendrils of hair and sent shivers racing through me as he spoke. "I don't know what you and Evla are up to. I don't know how you managed to pass the first task. But as a Lianthiran Fae, I suspect you are not powerful enough to take on the second, much more strenuous test, are you?"

I kept my lips tightly sealed. There was no way I was answering that, but he seemed to take my silence as agreement.

"I thought not," he smirked.

His free hand was curled in a loose fist, which he raised into the small gap between us, holding it cautiously as though wanting to make sure no one else could see. He slowly opened his fingers to display a ring unlike anything I'd seen before. It appeared to be made of frosted glass, but the inner surface, the side that would rest against the wearer's skin, was a fathomless mirror.

“Just as a ring of mirrors reflects infinite images and magnifies light, so this enchanted mirror ring will reflect and magnify your magic,” he whispered.

Muscles I didn't realize had tensed with adrenaline suddenly weakened at that revelation. The amount of magic it would take to enchant such a ring—the amount of *money* it would take to purchase such a ring—was absolutely staggering. Why would the prince have such a ring? And why would he offer it to me?

But of course I couldn't ask him those things. Instead, I made sure my face was as cold and hard as stone as I said, “You'll help me complete the task, but I don't suppose you'll tell me what the task is?”

One of the prince's eyebrows twitched in what I suspected was amusement. “Well, I certainly can't make things *that* easy on you,” he replied.

I nodded sharply in understanding. Of course not. He was still testing me, but now that he had somehow found out my heritage, he wanted to give me a fighting chance.

Or it was a trap. A very likely possibility, in fact. Death, imprisonment, and the collapse of our trafficking ring were all still terrifying options at this point.

“The test is still several days away, but you'll need time to practice with the ring and get used to how it affects your magic,” he continued, his voice suddenly more casual and relaxed. “Just try not to do anything too big before your next test, such as level another monastery, so you don't catch anyone's notice.”

Before I could reply, he released my wrist. “If you'll excuse me,” he said, a bit louder now, “I'm expected to meet

with my parents before breakfast, but I'll see you in the private dining room.”

The prince spun away down a path that turned sharply towards the castle, disappearing behind a trellis.

As I heard Rorlyn scurry up behind me, I tried to figure out the best way to conceal the ring the prince had given me. Curse these fine gowns and their lack of pockets! And the short sleeves of late summer were no help either.

I settled for cupping the ring carefully in the palm of my left hand and doing my best to bury that hand in my layers of organza as I turned to greet the attendant with a noble smile. “Shall we head back?” I asked serenely.

Completely ignoring my question, the eager maid said in a poorly attempted whisper, “If I may be so forward to say so, Your Highness, you and the prince seem quite besotted with one another. How delightful if a political match could also be a love affair! You two are getting along much better than anyone hoped!”

“So it would seem,” I muttered as I ran my thumb along the edge of the ring in my palm.

We did seem to be forming a rather...*unusual* relationship. But now I had a tough choice to make.

Should I trust the prince had my best interest at heart and use the ring?

Or should I treat this as a trap and have nothing to do with this mysterious glass ring?

And on top of it all, I still needed to determine whether I wanted to marry this strange, unexpected character of a prince, or if I should be more resolute in finding a way out of Evla's web of lies.

Aieldir

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, I avoided Princess Imp— no, Ceris. I avoided Ceris. She had a name now.

Anyway, I avoided Ceris, not because I wasn't wildly curious about her (because I was), but because I was concerned about the questions she might ask me. There were too many things I wasn't prepared to answer, not until I knew her better.

But the logical part of my brain argued with me. How could I get to know her better if I was avoiding her? In fact, I'd put myself in quite the dilemma. How could I get my own questions answered if I didn't speak to Princess I— *no*, Ceris!

I decided to solve that by going to Evla.

Like both my parents' suites and mine, Evla's rooms were located in the family wing. We each had a ground-floor sitting room for entertaining guests with double doors opening up into the courtyard. Above was an upper-level loft bedroom and dressing room with a second door that opened directly into a private interior corridor that only our family and our personal servants had access to. Since we were family and it was more convenient, I usually knocked at her upper-level door. But since I was here to talk about Ceris, it seemed only fitting that I use the same door I'd seen Ceris use.

I pounded on the door, which was almost immediately answered by an Evla who appeared very startled and confused to see me at the non-family entrance. "Aieldir!" she exclaimed. "What do—"

“Good morning, Evla!” I sang with my most princely, debonair smile. Then I launched into a breathless frenzied chatter. “Breakfast will be served soon. I do hope there’s fresh wilderberries today since it’s the perfect season for them. And speaking of the season, have you noticed this weather?”

Evla tried to respond, but I pushed through with my rambling. “Just the slightest hint of a chill, letting us know that fall is approaching. I think we ought to take a nice stroll through the courtyard on the way to breakfast together. Don’t you think that sounds nice? We have a long day ahead of us with the princess’s second test happening today.”

“Aiildir, wha—”

“It’s a shame the carriages only fit four passengers or you could ride with us,” I sped on. “I do hope it stays pleasant all day since we’ll be outside so much. After all, this pre-autumn weather never lasts long enough. Mind telling me what bizarre scheme you and Ceris are running?”

Although Evla’s face had been puzzled since the moment she saw me at her door, at that last question, her face grew ashen. “What did she tell you?”

I hoped my voice sounded thunderous as I replied, “Nothing. I know the game, and I know the players, but not the motive. I haven’t said anything to the king and queen yet, but I need you to explain what’s going on.”

Evla’s eyes narrowed. She seemed to have recovered from her shock quickly. “If I didn’t even tell Ceris that, what makes you think I’d tell you?”

It was my turn to be shocked. “Wait. So she didn’t tell me because she doesn’t *know*?”

The implications of what that might mean swirled in my head. This wasn't an attempted coup by some common—but clearly talented—woman. This was my own family turning on me. And I still didn't know *why*!

I scrubbed my face roughly with my hands, hoping it would shake off the cloud of confusion and provide some clarity. It didn't. "Evla," I began slowly, not sure if I wanted to know the answer, "is Ceris a willing partner in this plot of yours?"

At first, I didn't think Evla was going to answer. I could only see her out of the corner of my eye because I couldn't bring myself to look at her and instead stared at a chip in a stone just to the left of her door.

"No," she finally whispered. "Ceris may be playing her part very well, but it's only because I gave her no choice."

So many emotions poured into me at once that it seemed to hurt almost physically. They were tough to distinguish, but I recognized betrayal, relief, confusion, fury, and grief.

"Evla, Aieldir!" a voice called. I turned to see my parents approaching us and tried to put together a calm, cordial expression. "Shall we all walk to breakfast together?" my mother asked, using the same smile she used when greeting important dignitaries.

I returned the smile, albeit a little stiffly. "Certainly. Evla and I were just saying we hoped there were fresh wilderberries this morning." I wasn't ready to clue them in on any of this yet, so I had to at least pretend that everything was going according to their Get-Our-Pitiful-Son-A-Powerful-Wife Plan.

So during breakfast and the long ride to the site of the second task, I did what Fae do best—put on a charming mask

that hid my personal turmoil and engage in polite, but vague conversation. Ceris appeared to be doing the same, but more masterfully than I was capable of doing. I couldn't help but admire her cunning, and in the back of my mind, I tried unsuccessfully to squash the thought that she would make a much better monarch than I would.

Is that what's really behind Evla's plot? Is she really trying to do what's best for Lianthir? I wondered, but I was afraid to assume Evla would have such a positive motivation. *Working for the best of the kingdom doesn't sound like her, but I have to admit that I can already picture Ceris playing the role of shrewd political player among the other Fae leaders of the realm.*

I gazed at the woman next to me, clothed in blue-grey satin, her posture immaculate, eyes brimming with a fiery confidence. She sat a little closer to me than the space required, and I started to wonder whether there was any meaning or purpose behind that. Was I really considering this? Marrying Evla's pawn who successfully deceived our whole family...and almost me?

Ceris swiveled to look at me so smoothly that I doubted an egg balanced on her head would've rolled off it. Nothing in her expression even hinted at our secrets, either that I knew her true identity or that I'd given her my glass ring. "All the secrecy around this second test has me wondering if I should be worried," she said, but neither her small smile nor melodic alto tone relayed any of her supposed concern.

I gave her my most well-practiced charming smile. "Oh, but Iloma dear, you should know better than to let any *seeds* of anxiety bloom in your heart. Surely you have the utmost confidence in your own abilities."

Even though I refused to look directly at her, I could feel Mother's sharp eyes on me as I dropped the tantalizing hint. It was still a mystery why they wouldn't share the nature of the test with their beloved "Princess Iloma." I knew they wanted the test to be as difficult as possible, but this felt a little ridiculous to me.

Although Ceris's expression didn't change, I could've sworn I recognized a spark of understanding in her eyes as she took my clue. "It is not my powers I doubt. But as you well know, we Searonians are a people well-conditioned to be wary of secrets."

She had a point—if she'd truly been the Searonian princess, of course. The introduction of human blood and customs to Lianthir had caused a number of problems for the Fae race, but one of the upsides was that it had mellowed our natural bloodthirst. Even the nobility of Lianthir, who had kept their bloodlines untainted for the most part, hadn't been exempt from the influence of the foreign concepts of benevolence and tenderness found in human culture.

Therefore, at least here in Lianthir, we had much less concern over internal backstabbing than we had, say, a century ago. Even if my father's concerns about Lord Ithuir and the Grand Council were legitimate, our bigger concern was still an attack from outside the kingdom, especially if word got out that we were as vulnerable as we truly were.

However, the opposite was true in other kingdoms of our realm. Generally speaking, Fae courts were so caught up in their own internal power struggles that they rarely cast their eyes upon the other nations. Searon was no exception, and they watched their "friends" more closely than their supposed

rival kingdoms. So Ceris's reply was perfectly in line with her cover story.

"It's a good idea to be wary of secrets," I agreed. "But I have reason to suspect that I should be more suspicious of your secrets than you should be of ours."

I could've sworn I felt an icy wave hit me. That's how hard I imagined my mother was glaring at me, but I still refused to even acknowledge her presence.

Meanwhile, Ceris's face was unreadable. Her eyes were locked with mine, but they stubbornly revealed nothing. I'd hoped I'd get a glimpse at just how apprehensive I should be about her arrangement with Evla, but her determined chin and eyes the color of wet stone refused to tell me anything.

"Well, a woman must have her secrets," my mother cut in, trying to smooth things over. "It's our prerogative. It's how we keep ourselves mysterious and alluring."

When I glanced over at Mother, her eyes were the opposite of Ceris's—fiery and full of warning. I inwardly sighed. Yes, I knew she thought I was blowing our chance at an alliance with Searon. But of course, she didn't know that the young woman—who was sitting so close to me that I was unable to ignore how our elbows occasionally brushed—wasn't even from Searon.

I smirked at Ceris and wondered how far I could push this. Leaning into her and tipping my head towards her sunrise-pink lips, I thought I briefly noticed a crack in her poise before she recovered. "Princess Iloma, is that why you keep so many secrets? Are you hoping to seduce me and snare a handsome crown prince for a husband?"

A choking sound came from Mother as she tried to swallow what I assumed was a squeak of horror, and Father inhaled sharply, giving the first sign that he was listening to anything that was happening in the carriage.

But as I kept my eyes stubbornly on Ceris, I saw a corner of her mouth twitch in humor. “Prince Aiildir, I didn’t think I had to work that hard to tempt you. It certainly seemed to me that I already had you caught in my web.”

I couldn’t help the huge grin that crossed my face. I didn’t even have to look at my parents to know that they’d both stopped breathing. The air pressure inside the carriage seemed to change as the tension between them thickened. I couldn’t help but feel a little smug at their reaction. As much as they criticized me for my “human-influenced candor,” it was nice to see their pure-blood Fae masks crack.

This pharmaceutical-trafficker-turned-princess-impostor is a lot of fun, I thought. She seems to enjoy scandalizing my parents as much as I do.

“Well, my dear Princess Iloma,” I spoke in the slyest voice I could muster, wondering just how far we could push my parents, “I do have to admit that thanks to that dress you’re wearing, I may be drawn a bit deeper into your spell. I mean, the way it shows off your exquisi—”

“Ildemar, my dear,” my mother interrupted, a strain of panic bleeding through her normally prim voice, “do you think that perhaps we ought to go ahead and tell Princess Iloma about the test?”

I couldn’t help my satisfied smirk that my mother, prideful as she always was of her immaculate self-control, was struggling to disguise her discomfort. Meanwhile, this low-born Lianthiran woman sitting next to me, who was almost

certainly of mixed-blood heritage, wore an unblemished veil of composed impassivity.

“Yes, I think we may have gone a bit overboard when we decided to keep this second task a surprise,” my father enthusiastically agreed. A subtle glance at me conveyed that he had been just as bothered by our conversation as Mother had, but he’d held his tongue better.

However, even before he’d finished speaking, the carriage had started to slow to a stop. I pulled aside the curtains closest to me and announced, “Well, that may not be necessary. It seems we’re already here.”

As we alighted from the carriage, I surveyed our surroundings. After traveling some way through the woods, we had come to a clearing around half a mile in diameter. But instead of a bright, open, green space, everything was blackened and had a slightly acrid smell. The most ancient part of my Fae blood revolted at the ruin, making me feel physically ill.

Fainwyl approached us slowly, his head slightly bowed, but this time, I think it was more out of sorrow than of respect for our titles. Despite the beautiful weather, he wore a dark cloak of mourning over his chief magician robes.

“Princess Iloma,” he began, his head still lowered, “there was a horrible blight in the forest. It turned all the leaves the color of ash and dropped poisoned fruits for the wildlife to consume. We magicians tried everything to stop it, but it continued to spread. We had no choice but to burn the infected area to prevent it from spreading any farther.”

I glanced at Ceris to see how she was taking this news. She looked as poised as ever, but her eyes were fixed on the burnt landscape, a horrifying blemish in the otherwise flourishing

woods. Despite the lack of concern on her face, I could see tension in the way she held her shoulders. Was she formulating a plan?

“We have sown seeds throughout the burnt area,” Fainwyl continued. “Now we’ll be testing your connection to the eternal and most sacred purpose of our noble race—your relationship to all things green and growing. We ask you to call to these seeds and have them grow to maturity. We need you to heal this forest and restore it with new, healthy plant life as though the blight never happened.”

Ceris paused for so long, still staring at the charred earth, that I wondered if she’d even heard Fainwyl speaking to her. Finally, she turned and nodded to him. “I understand.”

Aware that she was going to be in the spotlight again, she activated her wing charm to display a massive set of wings that matched her blue-grey dress and started toward the middle of the massive circle. Meanwhile, my family and I—along with all the other observers who had come in their own carriages—backed deeper into the forest. This test wasn’t expected to be as dangerous as the first; it wasn’t of a destructive nature. Still, it was a good idea to exercise caution due to the amount of magic involved.

It took Ceris several minutes to reach the center of the circle. As she walked, I could hear the occasional snap of a dry, burnt twig cracking under her feet, and scorched brambles clawed at her satin hem.

I barely breathed as I watched Ceris, wondering what she was thinking, what she was planning. And I still wasn’t sure what would happen after this, whether she passed or failed. Even more confusing was that I wasn’t sure what I *wanted* to happen.

Take it moment by moment, Aieldir, I reminded myself. Let's see what happens in these next several minutes.

When she finally halted, she stood still only briefly. There was a slight movement of her arms—maybe putting on the glass ring I'd given her? She would need it. Even among pure-blood Fae, there weren't many who could accomplish a task of this magnitude.

Then much to my surprise, she eased herself down to her knees and bowed low to the earth. Mindless of the ash, she stretched her arms in front and slightly outwards, pressing her palms to the ground.

And with a silent prayer to any gods who would listen, I held my breath.

Chapter 6

The Arrangement



Ceris

I had never seen such broken earth. It stirred something within me, something old and nearly forgotten. Without understanding what I was doing or why, I found myself brought to my knees. I knew I was going to have ash ground deep into the luxurious satin gown, but at the moment, that didn't matter.

A strange sort of melody swelled up within my core, an alien song of lament. I wasn't sure if it was the scorched ground crying out to me or the blood of my ancestors in my veins mourning. Maybe it was both—a mysterious mingling of souls, both Fae and botanical, in a haunting duet. All I knew was that the forest was wounded, and my magic longed to heal it.

But this task was nothing like the last one! Destruction is easy and has a broad margin for error. Creation, on the other hand—especially creating *life*—is delicate work. It would take an enormous amount of power to grow a forest, but more importantly, an enormous amount of control.

I'd been practicing with the glass ring over the past few days, but I didn't feel I'd come close to mastering it. When my magic came into contact with the ring, it grew wild and

unmanageable. More than once, I'd accidentally destroyed something in my room and had to remove the ring to repair or hide the damage with my un-magnified magic.

But somehow I knew I could trust my magic this time. It was yearning to be released upon the scarred earth. Even with the power of the ring pouring fuel into my magic, it would connect to the seeds and fulfill the original, hallowed purpose of our people—caring for nature.

I took a deep breath, preparing to open the floodgates of my roaring magic, and much to my surprise, the image of Prince Aiendir's chiseled jaw, ebony curls, and midnight-blue eyes floated to the surface of my mind. He was counting on me to complete this task, wanting me to succeed, but why? And why was it so important to me that I not let him down?

I forced myself to refocus. The "whys" could always be sorted out later. But right here in this moment, all that mattered was that the forest was healed. Aiendir believed I could do it. And with the glass ring mirroring my enthusiastic magic and multiplying it, I believed it too.

With a deep sigh, I exhaled magic through every pore, the ring grew almost unbearably hot, and I felt a silvery mist filling the blackened clearing. As the soft, but eager magic curled its plumes around the mounds of ash, it dug into the soil, reaching for the new life just waiting to burst forth. It coaxed the seeds and nourished them, persuading them that if they sprouted, they'd find light and warmth just above the ash.

I was a mixed-blood Fae. I came from parents and even grandparents with both Fae and human ancestors. The human side may have introduced us to the concept of genetics and how dominant and recessive traits worked, but I didn't

understand it enough to determine how I'd managed to inherit more of the Fae genes than human ones.

But that knowledge hadn't prepared me for what I experienced as I knelt on the ruined forest floor. I could practically *feel* my Fae ancestors and hear their voices in the marrow of my bones and in the mist of my magic, whispering to the seeds and calling them to flourish. The veil between the here and the hereafter stretched thin, and for the first time in my life, I felt intimately connected across millenia to something we'd forgotten not just here in Lianthir, but throughout the majority of the Fae realm.

I could feel the earth changing, sighing in relief, but I didn't move or look up from the ground until my magic felt... content, I suppose. It seemed satisfied and seeped into the ground to continue its ongoing long-term work. The ring grew cool again upon my finger, and I finally rocked back on my heels to look around.

I couldn't even see my observers anymore. The forest around me was thick with trees that looked decades old, supple vines, even a variety of shade-loving flowers. I looked around for any trace of the ash that had been here moments before, but I couldn't see even a speck of black among the greens, browns, and smaller blossoms of color.

I really created a forest from seed and ash! I marveled in disbelief. Still gaping at the forest around me, I slowly got to my feet and tried to find my way through the now-unfamiliar landscape. Fortunately, after only walking maybe a hundred yards, the chief magician Fainwyl appeared in front of me, joy and triumph mingled on his face.

“Congratulations, Princess Iloma,” he greeted me. “You’ve completed your second and final test. And you haven’t

collapsed this time! We were a bit worried after what happened at the monastery.”

The ring! I thought. I’d forgotten to take it off and hide it in my sleeve. I wasn’t sure if either the chief magician or the royal monarchs would recognize what it was, but I didn’t want to take chances. Surely, they’d know I was a cheat and a fraud then.

I turned my most charming smile on the chief magician. “Yes, I suppose I’ve finally recovered from my near-drowning incident. But I have to admit that I’m completely disoriented now. I assume you’re here to show me the way back?”

“Yes, of course!” Fainwyl gave a quick, shallow bow. “Simply follow me.”

The moment his back was turned, I slipped the ring from my finger and tucked it into one of my tight elbow-length sleeves.

It was a longer walk back than it was prior to the test, thanks to all the new trees and underbrush we had to work around. My already ash-ruined dress snagged on briars and nettles. No woodland creatures had come to feast on the fresh vegetation yet, so it really was annoyingly overgrown. Perhaps the glass ring had been a bit overzealous in multiplying my magic.

When we finally came to the opening in the trees, the first face I spotted was Aiendir’s. He was grinning so broadly that if his smile grew any wider, his face would probably crack. His midnight eyes had warmed to such a brilliant blue in a shaft of sunlight that had broken through the leafy canopy that I couldn’t help but smile back.

By comparison, his parents' smiles were proud, but satisfied. The way the king's jaw was set, as though that smile only existed because he'd been carved that way, I could tell there was some harder emotion behind the king's expression, but I couldn't quite identify it. It almost looked like...greed, maybe?

"Congratulations, Princess," Aiendir said, extending an arm, which I graciously accepted. "That was a beautiful display of magic. You'd never know there was a blight or a fire here anymore!"

"Yes, congratulations," the king spoke in a deep, slick voice. "You've now passed both our tests."

"So this was the last one, then?" I asked. I remembered Evla saying there would possibly be a third one, but no one had mentioned a third test. Of course, it would be in perfect harmony with the devious nature of pure-blood Fae like King Ildemar to spring a surprise third test to catch me off guard.

"There was talk of a third test," Queen Eirlyss slowly admitted with a sideways glance at her husband, "but I believe we've ruled out a need for it."

The king nodded. "I agree. Princess Iloma of Searon, you have satisfied our requirements as we discussed in our correspondence with your parents."

It sounded like King Ildemar was going to say more on the topic, but Queen Eirlyss quickly jumped in. "Of course, just because you have our approval to marry our son doesn't mean anything is set in stone. The two of you must come to some sort of agreement."

"Your Majesties," Fainwyl interjected with a deep bow, "the carriage I rode in with Lady Evla and her personal guard

is just beyond this thicket here.” He gestured vaguely to some dense vegetation blocking our view to the right. “If I join Eirthwhyll and Luellir in their carriage, there should be room for the two of you to ride with her ladyship, if it so pleases you. That way, the prince and princess may discuss their thoughts on the matter privately.”

The queen’s eyes narrowed slightly. “I do agree that my son and the princess should be able to discuss their feelings without us, but would it be proper to leave them in a carriage without attendants?”

Fainwyl bowed again, just as low as before. “Your Majesty, I would never presume to suggest anything improper in regards to any royal sensitivities. Perhaps if the young prince and princess were to keep the curtains of their carriage open so they can be seen at all times, but not overheard over the noise of so many horses on the move, that might satisfy propriety.”

The queen silently thought for a moment and then glanced at Aiendir. “I suppose that would be decent enough.” She turned to her husband. “Darling, perhaps we should follow Fainwyl to Evla’s carriage.”

The king agreed, and soon Prince Aiendir and I were left with our coachman and footman. They took their seats on the exterior of the carriage, and Aiendir helped me inside, where he sat directly across from me this time. This was all done in such complete silence that I was worried that my pounding heart had to be audible to the men around me.

Not until that moment did I realize that not once that entire day, not even during the test, did I even think about my smuggling ring. I was surprised to realize that they weren’t the main reason I wanted to succeed in today’s task anymore. Nor

were my fears of imprisonment. Instead, I had wanted to do it for the forest's sake, and...surprisingly...for Aiendir.

I felt a little jealous of him as he pushed the curtains aside because he had something to do, a way for his hands to be busy. In the eternal seconds between being suddenly alone in the carriage with the prince to the moment we started moving—while the coachmen called to one another to organize their procession along the well-traveled road through the forest—I found myself unable to remember how to sit, where to place my hands, how to even *speak*. Even though I knew what I wanted, I had been trying very hard to focus on today's test and *not* think about what would happen afterwards. This was all moving so fast. Especially now that I knew that without my permission, Aiendir had started to become important to me, and I wasn't prepared to deal with that. I'd never had the presence of a man rattle me so.

Fortunately, Aiendir looked as awkward as I felt as he avoided looking at me and instead pulled at the trim on his sleeve as though tugging out loose threads. As soon as the wheels on the road hit a smooth, cruising speed, he finally looked up at me and said, "Wow. No pressure, am I right?"

"Sure. No pressure at all," I replied, proud of myself for keeping my voice steady. In all my previous adventures and schemes as a criminal smuggler, I'd been in more than my fair share of tight spaces and kept my composure. But this was my first time alone with a prince whom everyone expected me to marry, and there were no rules for this in the smuggler's handbook.

Aiendir gave a soul-deep sigh. "Look, we don't have to deci—"

“I want to be married,” I blurted out. “Immediately. How soon do you think we can make it happen?”

Aieldir

PRINCES GET a lot of training on conversation, etiquette, and diplomacy. Especially *crown* princes. We have to be prepared for a wide variety of thorny, high-stakes situations.

But I was never trained to handle a brash proposal from a criminal impersonating a princess.

So I sat like a brainless statue, utterly speechless, staring at Ceris for far too long.

Meanwhile, Ceris stared back at me, full of self-assurance, with the audacity to look almost...*haughty*. She didn't seem bothered one bit by my shocked silence. In fact, she acted like *she* had the upper hand here, when it was I who knew she was an impersonator and could turn her in at any moment.

Loethar was right. She was good. The fact that she had nothing on her side in this power play except this *presence* that she oozed—and it was working! A mixture of jealousy and resentment rumbled in the pit of my stomach.

I had to swallow hard before I could finally speak. “Let me see here. If you marry me, not only would you get out of the sentencing you deserve for your crimes, you get power, you get influence, you get a *throne* for sun and rain's sake! This seems like an awfully one-sided bargain. What would I get out of this arrangement?”

It would be ungentlemanly of me to refer to Ceris's smile as knavish, but the word “cunning” wouldn't be strong

enough. “What would *you* get out of this arrangement? Where should I begin?”

Ceris slid forward in her seat and leaned towards me, her ash-stained skirts brushing against my knees as the carriage jostled along. She held up one slender finger. “First, you never really wanted to marry the princess of Searon. You’re afraid of the power she and her kingdom would have over yours. Marrying me, a lowly horse-trainer’s assistant, I would have no political obligations to anyone outside of Lianthir, which is better for you and the kingdom.”

At least I had enough self-control to not react to her comment about not wanting to marry Princess Iloma. I’d never said that out loud, not to my parents, not even to myself. And somehow she knew my fears. Ceris might be more dangerous than I dreaded. Marriage to her would be a dangerous game, but rejecting her might be worse.

“Secondly,” she continued, her voice just barely loud enough to be heard over the sounds of the road, “do not pretend you haven’t noticed that I’m *good* at these political games. Forgive my saying so, Your Highness—” I raised an eyebrow at the irony in her suddenly formal tone, “—but rumor has it that you don’t have the guile necessary to stand up to the other monarchs of our realm.”

I could practically feel the blood drain from my face. What did she mean by “rumor has it”? Did the whole kingdom see me this way? Did those rumors include whispers of revolt as well?

I opened my mouth to defend my own cunning, but Ceris forged ahead: “I’m not saying you’re not intelligent. In fact, I’ve seen your cleverness and intellect displayed several times since I’ve been here.” Her face twisted into a smirk. “After all,

despite my rather prolific conspiratorial history, you're the first one to discover my true identity."

There was no way I was about to tell her that Loethar did the legwork on that.

But clearly Ceris wasn't expecting a response yet. Instead, her gaze dropped to my still-open mouth, and she reached out to run a fingertip along my jawline and tap it shut so hard my teeth clicked together uncomfortably. "And thirdly, your father—the *King*—owes me a Favor."

My jaw—which she now held in her hand in what could be interpreted either as an intimate touch or a threatening one—tensed up so hard, I felt pressure build in my ears. Oh no. Favors were dangerous things in our realm. Magic could bind my father to her will if she was devious enough. I tried to swallow my panic, but I'm pretty sure it was written on my face.

Ceris's voice lowered to a hiss. "Yes, your father made the foolish choice to express gratitude and an implied debt to me, thinking, of course, that I was a representative of Searon and that he was pledging himself to them. If necessary, I could use that Favor to force his hand on the matter. Personally, I'd rather use the Favor to have him back me once it's inevitably found out that I'm not the princess. Fortunately, I think I still can because you know I'm right that I can help you rule this kingdom and provide a strong front against our rivals."

I wanted to counter her, to threaten her with a prison cell or execution, but even only knowing Ceris a short time, I knew she would be able to twist and outmaneuver anything I threw at her. She was right. She was dangerously good at these games.

Besides, it was getting harder to think straight with her warm hand under my chin.

“What are your terms?” I asked, trying not to let any sense of defeat creep into my voice. It helped that she still held my jaw, so my voice came out hard anyway.

She finally released me in satisfaction and leaned back slightly. “We marry as soon as we can make arrangements. I think I can convince your parents to plan the wedding soon enough that they won’t be able to invite Princess Iloma’s family from Searon.”

It was ungentlemanly, I know, but at that moment, I wanted to knock that satisfied smirk from her face. But a good Fae would keep his emotions hidden, so I simply nodded. “My parents are so eager to make this marriage happen that they’d be thrilled to lock it in so quickly. And I think we can word it in a way that they won’t find it suspicious or ask questions about why a bride doesn’t care to have her family there.”

A satisfied smile crossed her face. “Perfect. And since I know I will eventually be discovered, I will expect you to back me as your wife when that day comes.”

“And that’s the reason for the big rush on the wedding,” I concluded. “Because it will be harder to get rid of you once you’re officially royalty. Very well then. I suppose I can agree to that, especially since it sounds like you’ll already have the king to back you up.”

Ceris moved on without acknowledging my acceptance of the previous term. “And for my last condition, this will be a marriage in name and political status only.”

I dropped my chin slightly and fixed her with what I hoped was an intimidating stare for several seconds before replying.

“For now,” I said sternly.

Ceris blinked a few times in surprise, and I felt rather satisfied at having blindsided an accomplished fraud. Then understanding dawned in her eyes, and her sharp edges dulled slightly. “You’ll need an heir,” she said in a soft tone.

As I stared back at her and refused to say anything, she shifted as though uncomfortable with my silence, which made me even more pleased. I leaned back against my seat and crossed my arms, even though the carriage hitting a sudden bump jerked me around and ruined the strong and solid aura I was going for.

After a moment of recalculation, Ceris regained that air of superiority which both annoyed and impressed me. “All right then. I suppose that’s fair and unavoidable given your position. One year. I require one year, and then we’ll have a discussion regarding...*arrangements* for an heir.”

“That’s reasonable,” I agreed. “And now for my terms.”

Ceris waved a hand towards me to acknowledge my turn in the discussion, which irked me more than a little. As the crown prince, I was supposed to be the authority figure over this horse trainer’s assistant.

“We’ve already discussed the necessity of an heir, and I can be amenable to one year on that.” I paused, but this time Ceris remained perfectly poised. Which was a shame since unsettling her had been fun. “However, there may come a time when I need you to support me and my position, just as I agree to support your right to be the future queen of Lianthir.”

Ceris tilted her head in curiosity. “That seems fair. But I can’t help but wonder why it’s necessary.”

“And finally,” I interjected, ignoring the implied question, “you will agree not to ask any questions of a personal or family-related nature or ask about my ring, which you *will* return to me.”

I held out my hand for the glass ring while a sly smile slid across Ceris’s face. She seemed to be enjoying our bargaining process. A stab of worry hit my gut, and I wondered if I should be more wary of this arrangement. Much to my detriment, I wasn’t particularly good with untangling the language used in Fae agreements like ours. I knew I was leaving myself—and Lianthir—more vulnerable than I could afford to be. And yet, I didn’t think I had a choice.

Ceris plucked the ring from up her sleeve and lightly placed it in my hand. “I can agree to those terms. Anything else?”

I paused, wondering if I’d forgotten something and trying to swallow the lump of anxiety that had crawled up from my stomach. What was it about this woman that left me feeling so powerless? “That is all. And you?”

“I think we have it covered.”

I took a deep breath to calm the anger I felt towards this treacherous woman and entered into the most dangerous bargain I’d ever been a part of. “Then I accept the arrangement and declare a fair trade.”

Ceris reached out and grasped my hand as a spark of magic ignited between us and a shivery mist slipped around and through our fingers.

Chapter 7

The Wedding



Ceris

Aieldir was right. His parents were so thrilled by their own success in arranging our marriage that they barely looked twice at us when we requested to be married before the King and Queen of Searon could arrive. Princess Iloma was the fourth and youngest child of the royal couple, so although the marriage would be a huge boon to Lianthir, the marriage of their spare's spare's spare likely wouldn't rank among their top political engagements.

At least, not when you're speaking in purely Fae values.

In celebration of our engagement, the King and Queen threw a massive ball. Apparently, they'd planned one to welcome me to Lianthir, but when I'd arrived half-drowned and scarcely able to breathe for a couple of days, it had been delayed indefinitely. So half the arrangements for a large celebration had already been done, and therefore, it took no time at all to whip up a formal engagement ball.

Although most of my dances were reserved for Aieldir, it was also necessary that I be properly introduced to all the most well-connected nobles. I'd seen many of them from afar at my tests, but since my welcome party had been canceled, I'd not had a chance to put faces with names.

I made small talk with the overly dignified ladies and danced with nearly all of the lords. As accustomed as I was to working with the slipperiest of the Fae, they had nothing on these high-born nobles. After every dance, I felt like I immediately needed to visit a washroom, as though oil was dripping from my hands.

All except for one.

There was one noble I danced with by the name of Lord Ithuir who, judging by his coppery beard and broader physique of solid muscle, had to be at least half-Sidhe. He stood apart from the rest of us Lianthiran Fae with our lithe, willowy silhouettes, and as we danced, I felt a strange sticky pull to his magic that made me even more uncomfortable than my previous dances. Instead of leaving with a sense of oil on my hands, I felt more like I'd torn myself away from tar.

As much as I disliked dancing with the lords, the most awkward of all the dances were the ones I spent with Aieldir. I felt guilty about the way I'd handled the conversation around marriage. I'd come to genuinely like him. He was sweet and so much more open than he had any right to be, raised as he was and with his pedigree.

Tonight, Aieldir and I wore matching outfits, and he looked quite attractive dressed head-to-toe in a cream fabric that seemed to blaze a fiery gold when it caught the light just right. His tunic, doublet, and cape were all embroidered with thick vines and leaves, and we both wore butterfly-esque wings that had that same supernatural ability to turn from ivory to gold with a shift in the lighting.

In fact, it was the intricacy of these outfits that caused Orlyss to insist that our wedding had to be *at least* ten days out. If she had to do both engagement outfits *and* a bridal

gown fit for a future queen, she needed time for herself and her team to complete them and still have time to breathe.

Most traditional Fae dances required minimal touching (which I appreciated while dancing with the oily lords), but during one particular melody where we were able to dance close enough that Aiendir and I were in a loose embrace, I tried to find a way to patch things up and reach out to him. However, it had to be done cautiously, because a true apology could dissolve our magical agreement and allow him to wiggle out of our marriage.

“Your Highness,” I whispered.

“Aiendir,” he interrupted, catching me off guard. “If we’re to be married, there’s no need for formality. You may call me Aiendir as long as I may call you Ceris in private.”

Startled, I regarded him carefully. Despite the familiarity of his words, there was no warmth in his voice, and he cast his gaze over my shoulder rather than look directly at me. Perhaps I’d done more damage than I’d intended.

“Aiendir,” I said slowly, “I admit that when making our marriage agreement, I might have come across harshly. It truly is my wish that you might benefit from our arrangement. I hope that you find happiness and well-being in our marriage.”

Aiendir gave me a sideways glance, but it was so quick I couldn’t tell if it was more wary or surprised. “Happiness, huh?” he muttered.

“Of course,” I said. I paused speaking long enough to add in the appropriate spin the dance called for and then immediately continued, “I wouldn’t want either of us to be in a marriage of misery. Just because love and romance are

impractical doesn't mean we can't both find satisfaction and perhaps even an enjoyable friendship...eventually."

There was a significant pause before Aiendir's response, but I wasn't sure if it was because he was concentrating on the steps to the dance—he really was a remarkable dancer—or whether he was thinking. "There was a time I had hoped we could be friends," he finally said, still refusing to look at me. "But I'm not sure I could have that type of relationship with someone who viewed me as a weak and incapable ruler."

My heart sank as the music came to a halt and the guests politely applauded the musicians. An announcer with a magically amplified voice invited everyone to adjourn to the dining hall where "the happy couple" would open the feast. I really had made a mess of things between us, but with all eyes turning upon us and expecting us to lead them to the banquet, I couldn't take the time to craft a reply.

And unfortunately, the next several days were such a breath-halting whirlwind of wedding planning, dress fittings, and social obligations that I essentially had no time alone with my future groom. I ate, slept, and breathed among clouds of ladies in uniforms or elaborate gowns constantly asking my approval on fabrics, flowers, and table assignments—as if I knew anything about the guests who were coming. Aiendir was rarely more than a flicker of onyx curls and whispery movements at the corner of my vision.

Finally the morning came where I stood on a pedestal before the largest mirror I'd ever seen, dripping with a flowing cape of starry lace that draped just below a set of snow-white wings and pooled around me. A delicate golden crown with thin spikes like abstract sunbeams perched on my glossy brown hair while embroidered stars and pearls flowed around

me in a fitted gown that flared slightly at mid-thigh beneath the matching cape. Even in my reflection, I could see my meager possessions collected in baskets behind me, which would be moved by dutiful servants into the suite next to Aiendir's during the wedding.

Everything about this marriage seemed wrong, knowing I was about to walk down the aisle towards a man who felt trapped into pledging himself to a woman who'd deceived him and was using him. But as soon as the wedding was out of the way, I would have as much private access to Aiendir as I wanted—and as he allowed, I supposed. Perhaps tonight I could knock on our adjoining door, and possibly he'd open it, and maybe we could go into this *with* each other instead of against each other.

Aiendir

WAITING NEXT to the priest for Ceris to appear, I felt like my heart had to be thudding loudly enough for the entire congregation of some three or four hundred guests to hear. The last-minute notice clearly hadn't kept any of the noble families from attending. As royalty, I was used to feeling like I was part of a spectacle, but the feeling was strong enough to choke me now that I was the *center* of said spectacle.

But it wasn't the crowd that was causing my sense of anxiety and dread. I just couldn't shake the feeling that the bargain I had struck with Ceris over our marriage would be my undoing. I had no business trying to go toe-to-toe with someone of her level of craftiness. Despite my parents' and tutors' best efforts to train me, I knew she could still hoodwink me.

Although the high, crisp collar of my white tunic with rich gold embroidery had a generous notch cut at the throat for ease of movement, the collar suddenly felt like a noose tightening around my neck. I didn't want to draw attention to my unease by tugging at the collar, so I tried subtly pulling at the gold trim on the slitted sleeves of my long, white surcoat, hoping that the slight shifting movement of the fabric against my skin would help ground me. It didn't work.

The music suddenly swelled, and my heart raced even faster, knowing that the woman who'd deceived an entire kingdom had to be coming for me. My gaze fixed itself to the back of the room, almost against my will. I tried to make my expression that of someone who was awaiting the love of his life, but it probably more closely resembled someone expecting a dragon to break down those solid double doors.

And yet, when the doors opened and Ceris began her slow procession toward me, her face dignified and glowing, trailing a river of lace so long that it took three attendants to carry it, my heart slowed. The star-studded lace looked like floating frost, setting off the golden warmth of her bare arms. She looked so lovely—a word I don't think I'd ever uttered before—that I wondered for the hundredth time if she used glamour, as I did, or if she was a natural beauty.

I couldn't really explain the calm that settled over me as Ceris approached, but as I watched her, I no longer thought of her as a fraud. Instead, I saw the woman who had been made breathless by the stores of healing medicines and accompanying herbal garden, the woman who had delighted in scandalizing my parents with our flirtatious banter, the woman who had humbled herself to kneel in ashes at the sight of a wounded forest. And as she arrived and took my hands in hers, my mutinous heart wondered if perhaps this could work out.

Maybe it was foolish to let myself hope that things could turn out fine—or even better than fine—between us. But I so desperately wanted to hang onto this moment of fleeting beauty and give into what was probably an overly romanticized illusion. Perhaps it was okay for just this moment to believe the best of Ceris and our future together as she took my hand and smiled reassuringly...even if that smile was for the sake of our audience.

My heart stayed calm and my breathing relaxed as the priest rattled off his formalities. But I did have a moment of panic when he said, “Princess Iloma of Searon, do you willingly pledge yourself in marriage to Prince Aiendir of Lianthir, seeking his welfare and that of his kingdom?” What if, by using the wrong name, we failed to activate the magic needed to seal the marriage agreement?

“I do,” Ceris replied, her expression reflecting none of my own fears.

“And do you, Prince Aiendir of Lianthir, willingly pledge yourself in marriage to Princess Iloma of Searon, seeking her welfare and that of your kingdom?” the priest asked me in turn.

I stared into Ceris’s eyes, wondering if the calm she exhibited meant I could trust this process or if she was trying to reassure me enough to take the bait to whatever scheme she had in mind, which might include twisting the meaning of the words I said next.

Drawing on every bit of training I’d received, I took the time I spent inhaling to craft together the best reply I could. As I spoke, I stared deep into Ceris’s eyes, willing with all my heart and all my magic that this vow I took would be sealed properly in the way *I* meant it. “I, Prince Aiendir of Lianthir,

willingly pledge myself in marriage to you, seeking your welfare and that of *our* kingdom.”

The room fell silent in the priest’s pause. I could almost *feel* the question everyone was silently mulling over: *Did he state it that way to create some sort of genius loophole we can’t identify, or is he merely trying to emphasize his love and commitment in a romantic manner?* However, I could’ve sworn I saw a flicker of respect cross Ceris’s face.

Finally, the priest regained his composure and finished his part. “Then I declare the two of you wedded partners in ensuring the welfare of the Kingdom of Lianthir. I invite you to join hands to seal your pledge, first with the traditional words of exchange, then with a kiss befitting a bride and groom.”

Ceris and I joined hands and locked eyes, each of us watching one another carefully to ensure we spoke in perfect unison. I couldn’t help but wonder if, as we touched, she could feel my pulse start to race again at the finality of what we were about to do. “I accept the arrangement and declare a fair trade.”

As we spoke the words of exchange, a spark flamed between our hands, and the familiar mist of magic wound its way up our arms, binding us together like a silk ribbon before blossoming into a soft, glittering cloud around us. I stifled a sigh of relief that the magic had worked, even with Ceris using a false name.

Then I leaned in for the expected kiss and was caught off guard by how firmly Ceris pressed her lips to mine. As inappropriate as it would be on many levels, I struggled to not laugh against her mouth. The force behind her kiss seemed just so very...*Ceris*. So I swallowed the laugh by trying to

strengthen the kiss and was rewarded by a sensation from her that felt like eagerness.

As the wedding guests gave their expected applause, we parted from the kiss, my mind a tangle of thoughts trying to determine the meaning behind that micro power clash. I gave my well-practiced princely smile to our myriad of guests and led my bride back up the aisle and towards the lavish reception planned only for the family and most exclusive of guests. A second, less extravagant celebration hosted in the acres of garden space was open to the public, but Ceris and I were—mercifully—only expected to make a brief appearance from a balcony for that event.

“How long do you think it will take for us to fulfill the social requirements at the reception before we can make our escape?” Ceris muttered to me once we were outside the double doors.

I couldn't help the amused smile that flashed across my face. “The expectation at our weddings is no different from what you're used to. The bulk of the entertainment responsibilities belongs to the parents. The ceremony is for the bride and groom, and the afterparty is for them.”

“So an hour?” Ceris asked hopefully.

I made a noncommittal noise. “Probably an hour and a half,” I admitted. “There are a number of courses to the meal, but we will get a break before dessert to address the crowds from the balcony. We're still lucky. My parents will probably keep the festivities going long after midnight.”

I glanced back to where the attendants were holding up the train of her lace cape and nearly got a faceful of wing. “Oh, but we can deactivate our wing charms now,” I said, pulling the chain out of my tunic to break the spell. “My parents will

keep theirs on because they're traditional like that, but since there will be limited space in the banqueting hall and the chairs don't accommodate wings well, we'll be forgiven if we disengage ours."

"Oh, thank the willows!" she sighed as she pulled her wing charm out of her dress. Her wings, a perfect duplicate of mine, winked out of existence. "I get that they're beautiful and a status symbol, but they're constantly in the way!"

We entered a smaller, more intimate sitting room to wait for the guests to fill the banqueting hall because Moon forbid the guests of honor arrive first. It would have been quite cozy if not for the flock of attendants carefully arranging the starry lace that followed us. I suddenly wished we were alone so I could ask Ceris how she felt about not having her family here on her wedding day, but since I wanted to know the real answer, not "Princess Iloma's" answer, I figured I'd wait.

"You look beautiful, by the way," I said, having finally decided on a topic that was safe to discuss around the attendants. After all, a groom complimenting the bride on their wedding day was only natural. "The stars and the sunburst crown really suit you."

Ceris snapped to face me, and I could see it in her eyes. She was calculating my words and all the potential meanings and motivations behind them. I sighed inwardly. How very *Fae* of her.

"Orlyss did an excellent job," she said slowly. "It was worth the few extra days she said she needed to complete the dress. Did she do your ensemble as well?" She nodded to my coat with the white-on-white star embroidery and impressively long tails.

“I don’t believe so, but I think she and the other seamstress who did mine worked very closely together,” I admitted, running my hand down the twin rows of gold buttons that split the coat in half. They perfectly matched both of our golden sunburst-style crowns.

The silence that followed was so painful that I could see even the attendants getting restless. My mind started drifting, and I wondered if my parents’ wedding day had been similar. Theirs had been a politically-motivated arrangement as well.

The awkwardness between us didn’t improve throughout the reception or the trip to the balcony to greet the masses. However, I did jealously admire how easy it seemed for Ceris to play the part of the politically-savvy, yet dutifully-devoted wife. She charmed her way through every encounter with nobles, magicians, even my distant relatives—which I suppose bode well for our future international relations.

I was relieved when we finally managed to make our escape to the family wing, where I first made sure that Ceris was able to enter her new suite with her key and then slipped into mine with a heavy sigh. It took me all of about five minutes to shed my heavy wedding coat, place my wing charm with the others in a locked drawer, and pour myself a glass of a strong spirit which had been gifted to me by one of the Grand Council members. I now couldn’t recall which lord it had come from, but I remembered it being presented in a garishly ornate silk sleeve with crystal and metal beading and wrapped in even more silk.

A sound which was part sigh and part groan emanated from my throat as I settled into a plush armchair with the glass. Even on days where I didn’t marry a fraudulent princess, any occasion where I had to put up a long-term front

with our smarmy nobles exhausted me and filled me with hopelessness for our future as a society.

I had just drained the glass, decided against pouring a second, and started pondering the temptation to retire early to my bed when I was startled to hear a knock from the door I'd never used before. It was situated on the upper landing, between the bedroom area and my washroom. Although I'd never used the door before, I knew it led into what was now Ceris's suite.

Torn between wariness and curiosity, I opened the door and was surprised to see that my new wife still wore her wedding dress. In the short time that I'd known her, I'd never seen such uncertainty on her face or the self-conscious way she folded her arms across her chest. "Ceris, what's going on?" I asked.

Instead of looking me in the eye, she gazed at my simple white tunic I'd worn beneath my coat. It made me wonder if perhaps I should've put something over it, maybe at least a doublet. A combination of fatigue and the dulling effects of the alcohol had made me forget all sense of modesty. Not to mention the sheer surprise of having my wife call at our adjoining doorway, something that perhaps I should've anticipated.

Wait. Had I at least kept my glamour up? I started to reach for my face and hair before remembering with relief that yes, I'd kept it on without thinking. I normally released it as part of my washing-up ritual before bed, which I hadn't started yet.

Ceris's voice had an uncharacteristic crack as she said, "I don't know how to do this."

I shifted my weight and tried to overpower the cloudy-headed sensation the alcohol had given me. I suppose

indulging in spirits after all the wine I'd had at our wedding celebration had been a bad idea. "What are you here to do, Ceris?"

There was a long pause as Ceris gazed at the floor. "I'm very good at what I do."

"Drug trafficking," I said with a nod.

She swung her face up to look at me so rapidly, I swear I heard her neck crack. Her eyes were wide with shock and her mouth gaped for just a moment before she recovered. "You uncovered more than I realized," she mumbled, her tone hinting at wounded pride.

It was so fun to shock this woman who, very likely, was not used to *ever* feeling surprised. I gave her a roguish smile and vowed to myself to find as many opportunities as I could to shock her. Curious about how she'd respond, I took one step closer and leaned against the doorway, putting me comfortably within her reach.

To my disappointment, Ceris seemed unaffected by my nearness. She merely sighed and forged ahead. "Anyway, yes, I'm a very good *medicinal smuggler*," she corrected. "I'm good at deception, sleight of hand, clandestine operations, that sort of thing. I had a perfect record before you came along." Her accompanying glare was both icy and adorable, but I wasn't about to tell her that.

"I fully believe that you are, Ceris," I assured her. "So what do you not know how to do?"

There was courage in the way Ceris set her shoulders as she fixed me with her river-rock-grey eyes. "I don't know how to unmask or be genuinely kind or think of others' feelings. I have...regrets about the way I handled my marriage proposal,

and—” she paused and swallowed, “—and I’m afraid I made you believe that I didn’t think you’d make a good king.”

I froze. Yes, I did think she saw me as a weak leader, but I was used to that. Nobody found me a particularly inspiring future king. Well, except maybe Loethar, which is why I tolerated his shenanigans. He occasionally tried to bolster my self-esteem by saying that I was smart enough to know when and whom to ask for guidance, which he claimed was an underrated wisdom.

When I didn’t reply, Ceris pushed on. “The truth is, I think you have both the brains and the heart to make one of the best kings Lianthir has ever seen. If you’d asked me two weeks ago if I thought the heart had anything to do with being a political powerhouse, I would’ve laughed.”

Ceris heaved a huge sigh that shuddered slightly. “But now I see that your compassion, your openness gives you a strength that maybe we haven’t seen enough of since the portal collapsed. I know that I seem to have inherited mostly Fae traits from my mixed-blood family, but ironically, I’m learning more about the value of human traits from a pure-blood Fae.”

How could I even respond to that? I was used to complaints about the influence of human culture on me, but this...this left me speechless. “You’re not used to being vulnerable, are you?” I asked to cover up my own discomfort.

“Never,” Ceris breathed.

With a complex mixture of boldness and affection brought on by Ceris’s words—and perhaps a bit from the alcohol—I reached out and wrapped a stray lock of her hair around my finger before following the curve of her jaw, just as she had done to me in the carriage after her proposal. Then I gripped

her jaw in that same firm, but gentle hold she'd used on me. "I look forward to getting to know you."

A hint of a smile flickered across her face. "My name is Ceris of Moonshade Glen. I'm the oldest of two daughters, but Liana is a midwife and a bore. My two biggest passions are circumventing the tight grip the crown has on the medicines its citizens so desperately need and the street tacos I enjoy perhaps too frequently from a human market vendor named Alfonso."

I grinned back. "And I hear you're married to a prince who is now quite exhausted and will have to get up terribly early because he shirked too many duties while preparing for your wedding. So goodnight, Ceris of Moonshade Glen, Princess of Lianthir. Get some rest, and we'll figure out this hopefully mutually beneficial partnership another time."

And then, because I still held her jaw and so desperately wanted to see that shocked expression again, I bestowed a firm, decisive kiss on those sunrise-pink lips. I released her jaw so she could stumble back into her room, nearly tripping over her unbelievably long train, and closed the door in her face. A smile of satisfaction crossed my lips at the memory of those wild, bewildered eyes that had gawked at me until the latch clicked.

Chapter 8

The Unexpected Test



Ceris

Being a princess—a real one—was a lot more work than I had expected. Looking back now after only a fortnight of marriage, I realized that the weeks I'd spent as a mere guest in the Gossamer Palace where everything seemed calm and leisurely were nothing but an illusion. The royal family had halted all their normal day-to-day work to focus on securing this strategic match for the heir, and I now suspected they'd used that to their advantage to lure me in and make me think that ruling Lianthir would be an easy job.

But now that things were back to business as usual, there were dryad representatives to meet with, elven leaders to appease, ambassadors from other nations to impress, treaties to sign, financial councils to oversee, and so many other meetings and papers and events that everything blurred together into one confusing political knot.

And of course, everything required *wings*. Thinking back to that time not long ago when Evla loaned me her wings for the fake wine hustling job, it was bittersweet to remember how excited I'd been to get all dressed up and wear those giant, obnoxious things. How naive I was back then!

Now I had to put up with wings on a daily basis. I comforted myself with the promise that when I had my turn as queen, I would do my best to make small, unobtrusive wings fashionable.

Since I was now the future queen of Lianthir, I was expected to go to all the events and wear all the wings and know just about everything about ruling a kingdom. And although Princess Iloma certainly had a lifetime of tutoring to prepare her for this, not even Evla had been able to pack in all the information I'd missed out on by being born a commoner.

Speaking of Evla, I would've thought I would see more of her now that we were living in such close quarters, but instead, she was more elusive than ever. I suspected she had to be avoiding me because I only saw her at private family meals, where she vanished as soon as I thought I might catch her alone. I'd thought for sure that now that Evla had her wish, and I was married to her cousin's son, she might finally tell me what her motivation was behind this horrible plot of hers that had—somehow—actually *worked*.

And yet, when I finally did manage to ambush her in the courtyard right outside her exterior door (after all, I prided myself on my stealth), all I got out of her was a tight-lipped glare and: "My motivation is not mine to share."

I kept my face solid as stone. "What do you mean your motivation isn't yours? Of course it is."

I'm good at interpreting facial expressions. *Really* good. It saved my life a couple of times on smuggling runs when I'd encountered people who wanted to claim my payout.

But I couldn't read Evla's stubbornly empty face when she refused to share why she'd started this whole reckless scheme.

“Maybe once you and Aiendir grow more comfortable with each other, he’ll tell you himself,” Evla said with a half-shrug, and then she pushed past me, leaving me more puzzled than ever. Maybe *Aiendir* would tell me?

After our wedding night when I knocked on our adjoining door and encountered my slightly inebriated bridegroom, I’d started visiting him in his suite about every other night, pestering him until he gave me what I called “secret princess lessons.” If I was expected to know as much as someone raised by a king and queen, then I needed to be tutored by someone who actually was.

Fortunately, he was incredibly patient with me. Each time, I half-expected to find the door locked from his side, but it never was. He always left it unlocked for me.

And much to my relief, Aiendir never tried to kiss me again. In fact, he never even acknowledged the kiss or gave any hint that he would be interested in a repeat performance. It must’ve been the alcohol that night; why else would he have done it?

“Ceris, do you want to review the relationships between the Remnant Courts and the major kingdoms?” Aiendir called through our adjoining doorway as I gathered up note-taking supplies from my writing desk.

“The Seelie, the Unseelie, and the Sidhe,” I recited, listing off the Remnant Courts like a good little student. “Sure.”

I gave the stack of paper a final tap-tap to even the edges and caught a glimpse of the bottle of a particularly dark red wine from our wedding several days ago resting on the corner of the desk. I’d nearly forgotten it was there and had *certainly* forgotten who had presented it to us. I started to wonder if

perhaps Aiendir would like to crack it open during our study session.

My husband's voice drifted through the open doorway. "Then you better make sure you have plenty of ink because the term 'complicated' doesn't even begin to describe the tangled politics there."

I made my way towards the adjoining door, making a quick detour to lean far enough over to check my hair in the washroom mirror. My dark waves looked decent but perhaps a bit uneven and not enough shine to my liking. Although it was a bit out of character for me, I allowed myself a moment of vain indulgence and applied a touch of glamour to smooth my locks and give them a lustrous boost.

"Here I am," I sang as I sailed into the room. I tugged at my skirts as I sat down so I wouldn't catch any uncomfortable wrinkles or bunches between myself and the settee cushion.

When I looked up at Aiendir, I was surprised to find him looking at me with a concerned wrinkle between his brows. I started to raise a hand to brush his curls from his forehead before I came to my senses and jerked my hand back. Our relationship may have been complicated, but that type of behavior certainly wasn't part of it.

I felt a blush rise to my cheeks, but it seemed that Aiendir hadn't even noticed what I'd been about to do. "Whatever happened to your trafficking ring?" he asked.

Although that was the last thing I'd ever expected Aiendir to ask me, I kept my face serene and merely took a deep breath. "It's my understanding that Evla went to my master and told him I'd been recruited to a higher-paying position, working for the same cause on a more elite level. I suppose that was clever since it was technically true."

“And none of them were there and figured out the truth when we greeted the public from the balcony on our wedding day?” Suddenly, his eyes widened in realization. “What if *anyone* from the city recognized you and reported it? They could’ve blown your cover with my parents!”

I rolled my eyes but softened it with a smile. “Relax, Aiendir. Don’t you think that considering my line of work, maybe, just maybe, I might know a spell or two to keep people from recognizing me?”

The concerned wrinkle vanished from his brow. “Good point,” he sighed.

“But it’s nice to see that you’re concerned for me,” I said with a brilliant smile.

Aiendir nodded. “Of course. Just because this isn’t a romantic marriage, it’s still in my own self-interest to maintain your cover as long as we can. It would be a terrible reflection on not just the royal family, but all of Lianthir if it got out that we’d been so thoroughly deceived by one of our own.”

My brilliant smile tightened slightly. “Yes. Of course. You need to watch out for the good of your family and your... kingdom. That makes total sense,” I assured him, but I was irritated that my voice was at least half an octave higher than normal.

“All right, enough stalling,” Aiendir said with a chuckle. He stretched his arm across the back of the settee and leaned over the stack of papers I was still gripping. “Do you have your previous notes in here from when we talked about the hierarchies within the Remnant Courts?”

I did my best to focus on Aiendir’s lesson, but it felt like my brain was already overflowing from a day full of meetings

and petitions. I called it a night early, which turned out fortunate because I was awakened well before dawn by a series of shouts and angry growls coming from Aiendir's rooms the next morning.

A strange mixture of sleep and adrenaline muddled my mind as I stumbled for a dressing gown. I had no idea who I might see when I crashed into Aiendir's suite. The likelihood was high I'd run into someone whom I wouldn't want to see me in a dressing gown, but I wouldn't let a little thing like modesty keep me from giving them a piece of my mind.

When I finally flung the door open, the roars of men took on words:

“How could they have fooled us all these years?”

“I thought you were full of bear scat when you said you had proof, Ithuir!”

“What do you have to say for yourself, you impostor?”

“I can't believe it—not a bump on him!”

My heart thudded extra hard at the word “impostor,” and it took a minute before I realized they weren't speaking about me. Still, the loft I stood in was in shambles with overturned furniture, and the cries from the seating area below didn't bode well for anyone. So I made my way to the railing beside the stairs and looked down at the raging group of men, some of whom I recognized but others I was less certain of from this angle.

After a deep breath to slow my heart rate, I tapped into my most regal voice and bellowed down to the men, “What are you foul knaves doing in my husband's quarters besides disturbing our sleep?”

An abrupt silence accompanied the mob, and nearly all of them turned their faces up to look at me. My heart was pounding as I examined this truly bewildering scene before me. Nothing made sense. Where did this chaos come from? I had no idea what was happening or who started it, but I needed to find a way to take charge...quickly!

Lord Ithuir, the red-haired half-Sidhe whose magic had felt like tar when we'd danced a couple weeks ago, stepped out from the crowd. "Princess Iloma, we do apologize for disrupting your sleep. But you should know that this 'prince' you married is an impostor. He, his parents, and almost certainly Lady Evla as well have been deceiving us for the past quarter-century."

The pompous lord gestured upwards and to my left, toward Aiendir's bedroom. "I exposed this pretender by planting a surprise for him and had the rest of the Grand Council meet me here this morning to see the results. Naturally, I was proven to be right, and this mere youth was revealed as the trickster he is."

My eyes darted back and forth between the men present while I tried to make sense of Lord Ithuir's claims. How seriously was I in danger? Where was Aiel—

Oh! Was *that* Aiendir? The scrawny young man in the middle with the frizzy brown-black curls and the boyish round face who refused to look up at me? He was stripped down completely bare, save a richly-embroidered cotton blanket he held around his waist to try to retain some dignity.

I kept my mouth steady, obscuring the fact that seeing my husband without glamour was almost as startling and embarrassing as it was seeing him naked. Feeling rather resolute, I turned my glare back to Lord Ithuir.

“You’ll have to explain,” I said simply. I didn’t know whether my cover was on more treacherous ground than ever, or if they were too invested in Aieldir’s secrets to investigate mine.

Lord Ithuir gave a deep, humble bow. “Your Highness, it pains me to tell you that you’ve been just as deceived as we all have. You thought you were marrying the crown prince of Lianthir and a pure-blood Fae, but this morning, we have proven at the very least that there’s no way this so-called ‘prince’ could be a pure-blood Fae. He’s most likely less than half.”

A familiar figure lurked at the edge of the room, so still that I hadn’t noticed him before now looked up at me apologetically. “It’s true, Princess,” Fainwyl said with obvious pain in his eyes. “They deceived us all. But iron doesn’t lie. The royal family is notoriously sensitive to it and reacts violently, but this impostor here...” Fainwyl lowered his gaze briefly towards Aieldir, and his shoulders fell. “Aieldir doesn’t have so much as a blemish.”

My heart sank, but my mind was racing faster than hummingbird wings, trying to figure out my best play here. “I am ashamed of myself for falling for such treachery,” I snarled. “The Kingdom of Searon has underestimated Lianthir. As weak as your blood is, we never in our wildest dreams imagined Lianthir capable of pulling off a deception for more than a couple days, let alone a couple decades.”

I jerked my head in Aieldir’s direction. “What’s to be done with the trickster?”

“The prisoner’s tower for now, along with the rest of his family,” piped up a dark-skinned noble whom I knew I’d met, but whose name I couldn’t place. Despite his immense wealth

and status—proudly on display in the amount of gold jewelry he wore around his arms and neck and even threaded through his clothing—he spoke humbly, almost as if he were asking for my approval.

I nodded. If he was going to imply I was the authority here, I was going to run with it. “Good!” I exclaimed. “Meanwhile, make sure your best law scholars are summoned immediately so that we can determine how to proceed with an investigation and who has the command in such a situation. It’s surely not every day that you Lianthirans have to scrutinize the actions and heritage of the entire top tier of your government.”

To my surprise, not one man below questioned me or seemed surprised by my orders. Their readiness to assume my authority was something I’d have to ponder over later, but at that moment, I was just relieved to find them bowing and muttering words of acquiescence. Maybe, just maybe, I might come out of this unscathed.

Once no one was looking at me again, I fixed my own eyes directly on the stranger who had to be Aiendir as the others shoved him toward the door. He kept his head down, still not allowing me a full glimpse of his face. Was it out of shame? Or fear? As I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, I willed him to look at me so that I could gather some idea of what was happening, but his eyes remained transfixed on the floor until he was gone from my sight.

Once I was alone and Aiendir’s door had swung shut, I took a shuddering breath as I recovered from my intense playacting. I couldn’t wrap my mind around what had just happened or how I’d get Aiendir out of this.

Wait. Did I *want* to get Aiendir out of this?

Of course you do, I growled at myself inwardly.

Now to piece together one clue at a time. Fainwyl had said something about iron? And judging by the mess in the loft—the tipped furniture and the bedsheets strewn all the way to the gaping bedroom door—they'd clearly torn him from his bed and searched his body. So was there something in his bed?

As I stepped slowly into his bedroom, I had the sense I was walking into something ominous and forbidden—something between a holy sanctuary and a crime scene. I approached his bed and visually examined the layers of silk and linen, but I was too afraid to touch anything, especially if iron was involved. I couldn't spot anything noticeable, and nothing seemed out of place, besides the fact the bedding had clearly been treated violently.

Then I spotted a small, dark shadow in a crease of twisted sheet just below the foot of the bed. Rather than glinting like bronze or silver, it seemed to greedily suck in the light that reached it. A sickness seized the pit of my stomach, and I hadn't even touched anything yet.

But I had to know. So I plucked the small, round shadow from the twisted sheet and held it in the palm of my hand. As I watched, I received confirmation in the form of angry red splotches blooming across my delicate skin and down my wrist. I stared in disbelief at what had detonated a national identity crisis.

A single pea-sized iron pellet.

Aieldir

GOSSAMER PALACE DIDN'T HAVE a dungeon like some of our neighboring kingdoms. Instead, we had a "prisoner's tower," which sounded more pleasant, almost romantic in comparison. But there was a reason only the most vile of criminals were sent here instead of the locally-based town prisons.

The prisoner's tower was thin and needle-like, several stories high, but each level only held a single cell, warded against magic and barred against brute strength. There was a stair landing outside each cell door with a couple chairs for guards and visitors, but unless someone came specifically to see you or bring your meals, you were utterly alone. Even when I tried calling out to my family members who were imprisoned here as well—or so I'd been told—my voice seemed to dissolve into the shadows instead of echoing off the stone and reaching the other floors.

As best I could tell, everyone seemed to be taking orders from Ceris. Was that because they still believed she was a Searonian princess and they knew they couldn't afford to offend the mighty Kingdom of Searon? That would make sense if whoever was behind this was still under the impression that we'd formed an alliance with Searon and was trying to avoid all-out war with the formidable kingdom.

But the hollow fear in the pit of my stomach said that maybe they were taking orders from Ceris because she was behind all of this. Had I doomed myself and my family by taking Ceris as my wife? Each time I let my guard down against that thought for one moment, that hollow feeling started clawing its way up into my chest where it nearly stopped my breath.

It shouldn't matter who's behind this, I tried convincing myself. The likely outcome is the same whether it's a rival

kingdom or my wife. So why didn't it feel the same? Since my arrangement with Ceris was little more than a political agreement, her betrayal couldn't be any worse than any international backstabbing.

Then, as if I'd summoned her, Ceris appeared at the door to the stairwell, following a guard whose name I should've known but didn't. She dismissed him with a curt order to return to his post, and he bowed and melted into the shadows, leaving me alone with my wife.

I refused to rise from where I sat on what passed for a cot in my unspeakably horrendous cell, and Ceris silently took a seat in one of the simple wooden chairs. Even though I watched her with deadpan eyes, waiting for her to speak her mind, we both remained silent for several minutes.

Finally, I asked, "What do you want, Ceris?"

When she spoke, her voice was soft and almost maddeningly calm. Although she wore a formal gown—this one of silver silk so lustrous it was almost reflective—which should've kept her posture immaculate, her shoulders were relaxed and her eyes gentler than I'd ever seen them. "I'm here to give you the opportunity to share whatever you feel you should with me."

I hoped that none of the shock I felt at such an unexpected reply showed on my face. But since my inability to hide my feelings was a weakness I begrudgingly acknowledged, she could probably see my surprise. "So you've come to gloat then?" I asked instead, hoping to be able to tell something by how she reacted to the question.

Not even a flicker of emotion crossed her face. "Is that what you think? That I set this up? You really do believe in my talents if you think this was my plan all along. Actually, no.

I'd say I'm as surprised as you are, but looking back on the day of our betrothal, you warned me that I might need to support your claim to the throne one day, I'd say you're probably less surprised."

It was a fair reply, and I felt the dread in the pit of my stomach lessen slightly. She'd agreed to that term when we spoke the words of exchange, but what if she'd found a loophole in that magic which would allow her to betray me? Could I trust Ceris? Or trust that we'd worded the agreement well enough that magic would hold her to her vow?

As I stared into her solemn deep-grey eyes, I realized trusting Ceris might be my only chance. I felt...surprisingly comfortable with that trust, but even that was limited to necessity. And in order to regain *her* trust after keeping so many secrets from her, perhaps I needed to meet her halfway.

I sighed and started to lean back before I remembered how filthy the wall behind me was, so I leaned forward and rested my arms on my knees instead. "Evla is not my mother's cousin," I confessed, and immediately I felt lighter. My heart moved in response to my step forward, and I found that trusting Ceris with my truth was easier than I expected. "She's not related to my parents at all, nor is she from Veldyr. She was a half-Fae living in the human realm with her completely human husband until he passed away at a young age and she came to the Fae realm to learn more about her Fae heritage."

I stole a glance at Ceris's face, but she may as well have been a sculpture for she hadn't moved at all, so I continued, "My parents, the king and queen, were never able to conceive a child themselves. I'm not sure how they first encountered Evla or found out about her. But here was a Fae who was

alone and unknown in our world...and she happened to be pregnant.”

A low sigh escaped Ceris, and I suspected she could see where the story was heading. I rushed ahead, afraid of stopping now: “They offered Evla an arrangement. They wanted to adopt her child and pass him off as their own, and in exchange, she would live the life of a royal for the rest of her days and remain in close proximity to the child of her beloved late husband. That way, she could still watch him grow up and be an influential part of his life.”

Ceris jumped in as she pieced it all together. “You’re only a quarter-blood Fae,” she said with not a single hint of judgment in her voice, “but back then, the portal was still standing. Your parents had no idea when they adopted you that it would one day be so crucial to restore the Fae bloodline and our magic.”

I didn’t even need to confirm Ceris’s words. There was no hiding the painful truth. But now I had to test the limits of the trust between us if I had any hope of saving all of us. The trust I had for her began to settle into place. But did she trust me enough for this next step?

I twisted my glass ring around my finger. I still couldn’t believe the nobles who’d brought me to the tower hadn’t demanded the ring from me, but I suppose it looked like a cheap trinket to them since they didn’t know what it could do. Fainwyl certainly had to know, and I wondered if ignoring it was the only way he knew he could help me in the face of such an angry mob. I couldn’t use magic in my cell—I couldn’t even wear the glamour Ceris was used to seeing, much to my embarrassment—but maybe he thought it could still be of use.

Even though my eyes were a less spectacular shade of blue than she probably recognized, I locked my gaze into hers. “Ceris, will you back my claim to the throne as you once vowed to do?”

Before replying, she stood and came close to the bars and beckoned me to approach her as well. When I came and stood mere inches from her warm, yet authoritative presence, she gripped the bars and leaned her forehead against the cold metal. “How can I help?” she whispered.

I twisted the ring from my finger. This was the moment I needed to trust her while keeping back our final and biggest secret, just in case this was still part of an elaborate ruse she was behind. “I need you to reopen the portal. Will you do that for me? With this ring, I’m confident you’ll be able to.”

Under different circumstances, I would’ve delighted in the shock that crossed Ceris’s face as I held the ring out to her. She really was breathtaking when her mask was down. “Have you forgotten that I’m still a Lianthiran Fae? What makes you think that I can reopen a centuries-old portal even with your magic mirror ring?”

“Because it’s the ring that opened the portal all those generations ago,” I said steadily.

As the shock faded from Ceris’s eyes, it was replaced by the shrewd, calculating spark I was used to seeing there. “And I don’t suppose you can tell me *how* to open it?”

My mouth formed an apologetic half-grin. “If only I could.”

Ceris glared at me. “And what will I find when I open it?”

My heart dropped to my knees. I’d been hoping she wouldn’t ask that. I wasn’t sure she’d find anything. But if I

told her what I suspected, what would she think of me? Would she see me for the coward I was?

But if I chose to keep this last secret, and she found nothing at the portal after all, I would be no worse off than I was now. I might be doomed at the hands of the mysterious party behind this coup, but perhaps I would've salvaged something reasonably positive about her perception of me.

"I'm not sure," I answered honestly. "Maybe nothing. But also maybe something. I'm afraid if I say it out loud, I might cross the stars and lose the only chance I have of salvation. Either way, I think this is our only chance to wrestle our kingdom back from whoever is trying to take it."

Ceris glowered at my answer, and she clearly didn't believe my flimsy excuse for not telling her why I was sending her to the portal. For one anxious moment, I thought she'd push me further, but instead she nodded. "I respect a man with secrets. And I don't have any other plausible course of action in mind.

"But," Ceris said sharply, "does this mean that all this time, you've had in your possession the key to reopening the portal to the human realm? Why now, Aiildir?"

There's no way she could've known how deeply that question punched me. "Because I'm a coward," I confessed. "I knew my parents wanted that portal to stay closed, and I was afraid of them. But now..."

I paused. Could I bring myself to tell her that *she* was the reason I now felt brave enough to defy my parents? That knowing her and seeing her integrity—the integrity I knew she'd deny if I accused her of it—gave me courage?

No, not yet. I guess I wasn't *that* courageous yet.

“But now I think it’s our only chance,” I finished instead.

She gave me one more penetrating stare, as though looking for any treachery I might be hiding, and then she reached out to take the ring from me. As I placed it in her palm, her other hand moved like lightning, gripping my jaw like she had one other time before. But this time, I could tell there was no threat behind it, leaving only that strange sense of intimacy as she looked into my eyes, and a slight hint of warmth from her breath heated my glamour-less face.

“I’ll take care of it, Aieldir,” Ceris whispered. My name had never sounded so good coming from anyone else’s lips. “I haven’t betrayed you, nor will I. I vow this without expecting anything in return.”

As she spoke, a shimmery mist that felt more like sunlight flowed through her hand into my jaw, warmth seeping through my skin and settling throughout my body. It shouldn’t have been possible with the wards on my cell, but somehow Ceris had activated an ancient magic that felt a bit like the words of exchange, but more...tender.

My gaze dropped to her mouth for a brief moment, just wondering, but Ceris dropped her hand and swirled out of the room, her dress flowing around her like a wave of quicksilver, leaving me completely alone but with a breath of hope to strengthen me.

Chapter 9

The Portal



Ceris

The average princess would have a hard time sneaking out of a palace, especially one in turmoil where every guard and soldier was on high alert. Fortunately, I'm not the average princess. I didn't even have to use any spells to make myself unrecognizable, which I was grateful for since I would probably need every speck of magic in my reserves for this endeavor.

As it turned out, Evla's suite hadn't been locked again after she'd likely been dragged out of her rooms just as Aieldir had been. That was convenient because her wardrobe was much larger and more varied than mine. Since I was in a hurry to leave before anyone came looking for me, I only grabbed a cloak of a bland shade of grey which would help me blend into the shadows and deter any interest.

Although I was methodical and deliberate in my movements getting out of the palace, there was a well of churning terror bubbling inside of me. I'd been in plenty of dangerous situations before, but I'd always known who or what I was up against. This situation with Aieldir had transpired so quickly and mysteriously that I couldn't even begin to guess who was behind all this turmoil.

So I decided to follow the directions of the person whom I trusted the most. And that person—ironically—was Aiendir. My husband of convenience, and the man who had suddenly and shockingly become more important than anyone or anything else in my life.

So far, leaving the palace had been easy, and I had made it to the edge of the castle grounds before mid-morning. But now the tricky part was the transportation. It was a bit too far to travel on foot, but snatching a horse from the castle grounds was too risky. Fortunately, not long after slipping uneventfully over a stone wall at the very back of the castle grounds, I came upon several horses out to pasture with no one in sight.

And then I spotted him. A powerfully-built unicorn with a pearlescent silver coat casting a judgmental gaze over me. Since I hadn't spotted a pegasus, nothing else in this pasture would compare to the speed he'd be able to achieve.

Fortunately, my day job gave me extensive experience with unicorns, so I knew the best way to approach a unicorn was with flattery and appealing to its pride.

“What a strong and handsome fellow you are,” I crooned.

The unicorn glared at me, unmoved by my baby talk.

“I'm sure a magnificent creature like you would love to be part of a historical event that would be lauded by all Faekind,” I continued. “You would be credited with saving a kingdom and bringing great prosperity to the people of Lianthir. I can't imagine another being more fitting for such an honor.”

Fortunately, the silvery beast agreed, and in the blink of an eye, we were tearing across the field and forest at a breakneck pace. There was definitely no way anyone from the castle would be catching up to us now, even if they did realize I was

missing and managed to determine the direction I was traveling. Still, since we were dealing with an unknown enemy with an unknown motive (although I strongly suspected the Sidhe since I'd seen more and more muscular, copper-bearded Fae about recently), there was no telling what sort of trickery they had in mind. Nipping this uprising quickly was essential.

As we rode, I clung to this line of thought, pondering over where this revolt could have originated, because it was much less terrifying than thinking of the myriad of ways everything could go horrifically wrong. What would our mysterious enemy do to Aieldir? And once they determined I was not the daughter of a powerful, greatly-feared monarch across the sea—which, of course, they would—what would they do to me?

With my thoughts racing, it seemed like only a few minutes before we were galloping down an old, half-hidden road overgrown by decades of little use. No one had much need to visit a broken-down portal these days.

When the vast mirror finally loomed into view, my unicorn mount slowed. My stomach rumbled—it had to be getting close to lunchtime, and I had skipped breakfast—but I had work to do.

I'd been here before, but the portal was bigger than I remembered, more than twice my height and at least nine feet wide. I would've expected it to be covered in foliage as the forest tried to claim it for its own, but it seemed the plant life respected its space, leaving the portal bare of even soil or fallen leaves.

Towering bronze tree trunks formed the side portions of the mirror's frame, and their massive, life-like branches above formed its upper boundary. Clusters of emeralds were organized in the shape of ash leaves. As beautiful as it was, the

mirror looked dead, its magic destroyed by the cracks covering its surface like a blanket of spiderwebs.

It was said that the dying of our magic had affected not just the people of Lianthir, but the very ground and all plant life. Since the magic in the earth and its inhabitants were interdependent upon one another, there was not enough wild magic left in the kingdom to sustain the portal. When the portal finally collapsed under the strain and the mirror shattered, they said it could be felt by all living creatures with any level of magic in their veins, but I was too young to remember.

I didn't give myself time to think about what I was doing or how insane I was for trying to resurrect a long-dead portal with nothing but my meager magic stores and a trinket I never fully mastered. I'd made three vows now to support Aieldir and Lianthir: first at our betrothal; second at our wedding; and third at his prison cell. Failure wasn't an option.

I dismounted from the unicorn's back and tossed my stolen cloak over a low-hanging branch of a nearby tree. On a whim, I fished a wing charm out of a hidden pocket, having brought it with me just in case I needed to intimidate someone, and put it around my neck to activate the largest set of wings I'd ever worn—white, feathery wings with silver tips that matched my dress of glistening silver silk. “If I'm going to tap into the most ancient and powerful level of my Fae genes, then I'm gonna look the part,” I explained to the unicorn, who still seemed more annoyed than impressed.

Turning to the mirror, I reached for whatever magic I could find within me.

And felt more than just my own magic answering the call.

Green magic from the trees, the bushes, even the soil flowed into me. Like a swollen river, eager to be used, the magic poured into me. Whether this new magic was due to something I'd done, the ring I wore, or its own eagerness to heal the mirror, I couldn't tell. All I knew was that I called for magic, and it came.

Until that moment, I hadn't allowed myself to think what would happen when I got to the portal, hoping I'd just *know*, but as I soaked up all the magic I could and then some, I felt a sensation like a green melody strumming against the currents of my magic—the very forest telling me what to do. And it told me to call for more. And more. And when I was full of the magic of earth and growing things and wind and rain and sunlight and moonbeams and couldn't hold anymore, the ring greedily soaked up the excess power.

I fell to my knees, but not in the same way that I had in the forest. Back then, I'd been responding to an emotional desire to be closer to the broken earth. But here? The sheer volume of magic was overtaking me, knocking me to the ground with wave after wave of power, bearing down on my shoulders with such weight that I strained just to keep myself from sprawling face-down in the dirt.

When I thought I couldn't possibly hold anything more and knew the ring would explode as it took in all the magic and multiplied it, like a mirror multiplying light, I felt something eternal and fathomless stirring. My first thought was the mirror portal, but no. This was something *beyond* the surface of the mirror.

Keep calling, was the message I felt in every fiber of my soul. My magic channels burned with the message. *The ring needs the Fae to call to nature.*

The Veil. The swirling grey fog that separated all the realms, known and unknown. The Veil was calling, aching for me to heal the portal from our realm to the human realm.

“I can’t!” I screamed aloud. “I can’t take any more magic.” It didn’t physically hurt, but I could feel the pressure of magic both within me pushing out *and* outside pressing in. My soul felt crushed as though it was about to be torn violently away from my body.

And then I felt them, the magical bonds that had been created when I took my vows to support Aiendir and his kingdom. Compared to the magic rampaging through me, they were mere threads. Knowing I could snap those strands in this moment, a thought dark and bold crawled into my mind.

I didn’t have to complete this.

I had a ring that multiplied my magic to a point that even a pure-blooded Fae would be unable to stand against me. I could take the ring and leave. No one could stop me. The possibilities were endless.

Then I thought of the man who shamelessly flirted with me, despite knowing who I was. I thought of the searing, half-drunken kiss Aiendir had given me on our wedding night. I thought of the late-night study sessions where he tirelessly taught me what I needed to know to conceal my identity. I thought of the way trust filled his eyes as he handed me the ring from his prison cell.

Aiendir trusted me. And even more remarkably, I trusted him. Trust was rare among the Fae, and I was not about to let it go for anything the ring and my freedom could possibly promise me.

So when the weirdly and unexpectedly sentient Veil rumbled through my magic channels, revealing the directions to my next step, it didn't have to ask me twice. *Send the magic to The Veil. The connection is waiting.*

I threw as much of the blazing magic overflowing my channels as I could at the mirror portal, hoping that was the right direction. I was fascinated to see that my silvery, misty Fae magic was blended with a green magic more like liquid tendrils—presumably from the forest—into a mixture that wasn't quite like smoke but wasn't quite like a waterfall.

But I could tell The Veil needed more. This was a realm-altering spell, and the realm had to answer. Aieldir had said the ring I was wearing created the original portal, but I now knew it required the allegiance of all the magics in the entire realm.

And somehow, at that moment, I knew how to get it.

Come, flora and fauna. Come, seed and soil. Come, wind and water. Come, sun and snow. Come, river and rain. Come, field and forest. Come, moss and mud. Come, grass and glacier. Come, reeds and roses. Come, twigs and tulips. Come, brambles and briars. Come, thistles and thorns.

Come heal the broken realm.

The magic no longer rushed into me, but *through* me, pure as sunlight on snow. It was difficult to breathe because my lungs were filled with magic instead of air. It should have ached, but instead the magic filled me with a lightheaded giddiness that made me want to melt into its stream, never to return.

There was a shattering, within, without, and I wasn't sure if my bones were intact or if I had a body left at all. Magic filled my lungs and stopped my breath, and I could no longer

sense whether my flooded heart was beating. I was keenly aware of a pulsing in my veins, but whether it was blood or sap, I could no longer say.

Then a fog lifted from my senses, and I felt them there, centuries of Fae, millennia of Fae, standing alongside me, those who had answered their deep and ancient calling of connecting to and caring for nature. They lived on in the spirit of the trees they'd nurtured, leaving traces of their magic behind. The voices of Fae and flora were indistinguishable as they sang a haunting song to the portal.

And finally, The Veil seemed satisfied.

The previously dark cracks between the shattered pieces of mirror glowed a matching bright white from within. I felt the already-built spell contained within the mirror spring to life, magic coursing through its channels once again. A small part of my brain not preoccupied with directing the magic sighed in relief at not having to construct an entirely new spell. I probably couldn't if I tried!

And when the magic inside me, around me, and even in the mirror began to fade, the glassy surface stood unbroken, and the emerald leaves seemed to glow faintly from within.

I risked a glance at the unicorn, just to make sure he hadn't run away during the display of immense power, and found him staring at me, looking slightly less judgmental. I managed a crooked smile at the beast. "Didn't expect that from me, did you? No offense taken. I never expected it from myself either."

I didn't have the energy to mount the unicorn again, but I at least managed to push myself away from the mirror to rest my back against an oak tree and wait. Aiendir had said this might save him and the kingdom. I still didn't know what that meant. But somehow, against all odds, he'd become so

important to me that he could've asked me to move the sea into the skies, and I would've found a way to do it.

Because—*thistles and thorns*—I loved that man. Here I was, sprawled on the forest floor, mangled by wild magic, and it occurred to me for the very first time that by some twist of fate, I'd fallen in love with my own husband. And I'd done all this reckless magic on the off chance that I might save that infuriating prince.

So I waited. Minutes. Hours. No idea, but I think I nodded off a time or two. Restoring a portal was apparently exhausting.

When the length of the shadows indicated we were approaching mid-afternoon, I thought I saw a ripple in the mirror's surface. I pushed myself up straighter and held my breath in anticipation. What was about to come through? Was I in danger?

Then from the surface slipped a man, two men, a small army, in fact. Some had the tapered ears of my people and some appeared to be fully human. They were mostly men, but more than a few women made up the ranks as well.

My attention was focused on the tall, ancient man who stood in front of the others with a crown of sunny gold and eyes like flint. I'd seen his face many times in portraits, much younger then, but never so much as in the last few weeks when I'd seen several of his portraits scattered throughout the castle.

The *King* was back.

Not King Ildemar, of course. This was King Lomaren, King Ildemar's father, whose fate was unknown after the portal collapsed. But here he stood before me, not looking relieved to be home, but rather full of rage.

His eyes scanned the forest, passed over the unicorn, and fell upon me. “Well done, magician,” he greeted in a tone that didn’t match his wrathful face. “My followers and I have been waiting to feel the quaking of the portal restored for many long years. May we escort you to the Gossamer Palace?”

Aieldir

KNOWING CERIS, she would’ve preferred to make a grand entrance and be the one to break the news of my freedom to me. Unfortunately, she had her thunder stolen by the commotion that was so overpowering I could hear it even up in the prisoner’s tower.

I’d stood on my cot, and by gripping the bars and forcing myself to ignore the grime on the walls, I had hoisted myself up high enough to see a small portion of the castle grounds from the window. Unfortunately, my window didn’t face any of the activity, so I had to rely on what I could hear. The shocked cries of men and women proclaiming King Lomaren’s return made their way as far as my cell, and I suspected that meant my dinner tray would be late, if it came at all.

So when Ceris finally made her way to my cell, shoving a guard fumbling his keys in front of her as she entered, she found me sitting on my cot, slumped against the wall in weariness and relief. Her face was far too smug as she crossed her arms and allowed the guard to unlock my door. “I told you I could do it,” she boasted.

I frowned. “You said no such thing. *I* was the one who told you I was confident you could do it.”

She shrugged and moved her hands to her hips. “Not like it matters anyway, but come on. I have a feeling you won’t want

to miss this.”

As the cell door swung open and I got to my feet, I eyed Ceris with curiosity. “Are my parents and Evla going to be released as well?”

A small wrinkle appeared between her brows. “That’s going to be up to the king. I think he intends to interrogate them first, and he’s absolutely seething with rage. But since I told him you were the one who gave me the ring and instructed me to open the portal, he seems inclined to trust you.”

I closed my eyes and sighed deeply, feeling a weight lift from my chest. I’d grown so used to carrying it that I’d forgotten it was there. “Thank you, Ceris. For everything.”

A mischievous glint flickered in her eyes. “Are you sure you want to *thank* me for this?”

I watched out of the corner of my eye as the guard descended the stairs and waited until he was likely out of earshot before taking a few steps closer to Ceris and wrapping an arm around her waist. It was satisfying to see the tilt of her head and the curious smile cross her face before I leaned towards her ear and whispered, “I can think of no hardened criminal I’d trust more with an unspecified favor.”

I pulled back so I could see her expression and was rewarded with the warmest, most genuine smile I’d ever seen from my wife. She grabbed both my hands and pulled me towards the stairwell. “Seriously, we should hurry. Your grandfather, his chief magician (who I guess was trapped in the human realm with him), and his soldiers have rounded up the Sidhe responsible, including Lord Ithuir.”

“So it *was* the Sidhe?” I asked as I continued to hold her hands firmly, unswayed by her gentle pull. Hoping to calm some of her excitement, I ran my thumbs across the backs of her hands.

“Sure was,” Ceris answered, tugging me a bit harder towards the stairs, my trick clearly not working. “It seems that they believed that since their magic has increased over the past couple centuries and ours has decreased, they might be able to overtake us and move up the international ranks. Of course, they still weren’t ready to take us on militarily or even magically yet, so their goal was to make Lianthir implode and turn the nobles against the royal family. They’d actually intended to do all this before our wedding because they didn’t want to bring Searon into the mix, but apparently we threw off their plans when we got married faster than anyone expected. That’s why they treated me with such respect and allowed me as much rein over the situation as they did, to keep from provoking Searon.”

I nodded. “I wish I was more surprised than I am that the Sidhe were behind this. They played to the spirit of the times all too well, with so many members of society—especially the powerful ones—being concerned about purity of blood and the potency of magic. I’m guessing Lord Ithuir was their spy?”

“That’s what King Lomaren has determined. And seriously, we need to get down there,” Ceris insisted, grasping my arm this time and pulling. “This has been a confusing day for the city, and as the rightful king, your grandfather wants to address the crowds.”

Stepping forward, I reached out my free arm, wrapped it around her waist once again, effectively trapping her. “Ceris,” I said just above a whisper, “what you just did for me, for us,

for Lianthir...you're amazing. I'm glad that you're on my side and that you chose to trust me.”

Maybe her lips didn't curl into a smile, but a spark lit up her eyes as she regarded me for a moment. “Aiendir, despite all the secrets you've kept since you were born, you're the most trustworthy Fae I've ever met. Lianthir needs you, and honestly...I think I do too.”

A type of unfamiliar warmth flooded my chest at her words. As the crown prince of Lianthir, I was used to feeling needed in many ways. I had never *not* felt like my existence was crucial to others and to our kingdom. At times, I was overwhelmed by how much everyone depended on me.

But with Ceris...she didn't need my crown or my power. The look in her eyes told me that she needed me as *Aiendir*. And that knowledge felt strange, beautiful, and intoxicating.

The urge to kiss my gorgeous wife coursed through me, and I tightened my hold on her waist, drawing her closer. I tilted my face down towards her and pressed my forehead to hers, but she planted one hand on my chest and firmly pushed me back. “We need to go now!” she hissed, and she nearly knocked me off balance as she jerked my arm towards the stairs.

I was glad she was in front of me as we descended because without any glamour to cover my face, I was sure it was crimson with humiliation. *What was I thinking?* I scolded myself. *We may be on better terms now, Aiendir, but for sun and rain's sake, man! You didn't actually think she was interested in you romantically, did you?*

There were several places around the castle designed for giving speeches or presenting ceremonies, but my grandfather chose none of them. They were generally elevated platforms

so the crowds could see the speaker from some distance, but it would seem the rightful king wanted to be able to be closer to his people, possibly so they could still identify him after all these years. Instead of speaking from a wall or balcony or platform, my grandfather stood at the top of a small set of stone stairs in the garden, so he stood only a few feet above everyone else, visible to all and close enough that everyone could see his features clearly.

Behind him was a diverse crowd of Fae, humans, and mixed-blood individuals across the spectrum. They surrounded a group of prisoners in a dense pattern that mostly obscured the prisoners' faces. However, I could have sworn I saw Lord Ithuir's scowl among them.

As we approached the gathered crowd from behind, Ceris turned and narrowed her eyes at me. "Are you planning to put your glamour back on? Or are you hoping to not be recognized?"

I tilted my head at her. "You just miss the handsome version of your husband."

"No, I'm not. I'm looking right at him," she replied smoothly. "I just figured if you don't want to be recognized, I should pull up the hood of my cloak. After fixing your cursed portal, it may be a while before I can pull off one of my disguise spells."

I was stunned speechless. Fortunately, I was saved from having to craft a reply when the king started speaking, his voice amplified by magic.

"My beloved Lianthirans, I've missed you these past two decades." Although his voice was magically magnified, he spoke in a soft, warm tone quite unlike the commanding one I'd expected. "I had almost given up hope of seeing my home

again. I am so grateful that in my old age, I'm able to be here among my Fae brothers and sisters."

As he continued, I was surprised by how much grief showed on his face. "I heard that the portal's collapse has caused significant fear for our magic and our heritage here in Lianthir. You've been made to feel afraid that our relationship with humans will be our undoing. But after spending so much time in the human realm, I can assure you that their strength may look different from ours, but they are most certainly *not* our kingdom's weakness."

I'd never heard a crowd of hundreds so silent. Not even after I spoke my vows on our wedding day and shocked everyone with my unusual word choices. It had to be the unexpected warmth in his demeanor. He certainly didn't seem to be "seething with rage" like Ceris had said, but I suspected he was holding it in check, wanting to win over his subjects whom he'd long been separated from, not terrify them.

My grandfather's eyes scanned the crowd. "I heard this attempted coup all began when it was discovered this morning that my grandson, your future king, is not a pure-blood Fae as you all had believed. But this is a kingdom built upon the best of two races. To deny half our heritage is to deny half our souls. It is our duty to not just build up our enchantments, but also our capacity for peacemaking.

"Is anyone concerned about his adoption making him illegitimate?" the king continued. "It is in our own regrettable history not many generations ago that we stole the babes of other races and raised them as our own. If our ancestors felt justified in honoring the bond between the parents and an abducted child, then we can surely honor the untraditional, but loving and mutually-beneficial family structure of those who

have chosen to weave their lives together. To reject that bond would be an overcorrection from our changeling days.”

At that, shocked murmurs broke out in the crowd. No one talked about our history of changeling babies. The subject was thoroughly taboo, even though nearly everyone these days had a human changeling in their family tree. It was a shameful part of Fae history that everyone knew about but no one acknowledged.

My grandfather’s voice grew soft and emotional again. “Ildemar, Eirlyss, and Evla made a decision to live together as a family and raise a son for the good of Aieldir, their family... and their kingdom. They may have chosen to keep the prince’s heritage a secret, but not for any malicious reason. They did it to protect him and to not cause panic among their people who were growing more and more fearful of human influence.

“I say this not because I condone their keeping it a secret, but I do understand, as the rest of you may as well,” the king continued. “They knew I didn’t approve of keeping it a secret, and I suspect that’s why they allowed me to remain in the human realm, to keep me from revealing it for them. Even though they had the key to reopening the portal all along.”

Gasps broke out among the already unsettled crowd. I even heard a few sobs. A roar started bubbling up through the crowd, and I started to be concerned about a potential mob forming. After all, my family was not the only one to have been torn apart by the collapse of the portal. When the citizens now heard that they could have had their loved ones trapped in the human realm back, and the crown did nothing to act, even when they could have, the sense of betrayal had to be unbearable.

King Lomaren's voice gained the magisterial tone of someone used to being obeyed. "Yes, you *should* be angry!" he agreed. "And I assure you that justice will be meted out. More investigation must take place before we can determine what that justice will look like, but it is coming.

"As for today, the greatest threat to Lianthir was the Sidhe," he continued, gesturing to the prisoners behind him. "As you can see, we've apprehended the Sidhe who attempted to destroy the royal family and nearly succeeded. Naturally, Lord Ithuir has been stripped of his title. There will be more investigations, particularly into my son and daughter-in-law's actions, but for now, you should all return to your homes and await further announcements in the days to come."

Naturally, the crowds refused to disperse, even as my grandfather and his followers headed back into the castle. Some called after him, demanding more information. Others turned to one another to gossip. Only a handful followed the king's directions to return to their normal activities.

I turned to Ceris, whom I'd tried not to notice had been leaning more and more into me during my grandfather's speech. After all, she'd already shrugged off a kiss from me, so she probably wasn't doing it out of affection. "Well, unless we're going to be needed, I suggest we return to our rooms to rest. I don't know about you, but I'm wor— Um, are you all right?"

When Ceris turned to me, her face was pale, and I realized why she'd started to lean against me so heavily. "Oh, um, I think I may have been too active too soon after using all that magic."

Horror filled me at how thoughtless I'd been. "Of course! I can't believe I didn't even think of how you must be feeling

right now. You're definitely in worse shape than I am. Here, lean on me, and I'll help you back to your rooms."

Ceris virtually collapsed against me in relief, and together we made our way slowly back to the family wing.

Before we got very far, though, I heard a deep, commanding voice say, "Of course, I absolutely agree that I'll need to get back with the Grand Council, but right now, I need a few minutes with my grandson, Prince Aiendir."

I turned around carefully, making sure that I didn't cause Ceris to lose her balance. Striding down the corridor with confidence was the grandfather I never knew, leaving his uncomfortable-looking entourage behind. "So you really are Aiendir, my mostly-human grandson?" he asked, his head cocked to the side as he looked me up and down.

As aware as I was of how unimpressive I looked at that moment—glamour-less and fresh out of the Prisoner's Tower—I swallowed hard. He may have defended me to the crowds, but I still didn't know what this relationship was going to look like. "That's how I'm known anyway," I replied, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

The king barked out a laugh. "He looks like a human, but he speaks like a Fae. And did your beautiful young bride tell me right? Was it really an iron pellet the size of a pea that brought down you and your parents and sparked the events that brought me back?"

A tired chuckle came from Ceris, and I blinked in surprise. "Well, I suppose so when you put it that way," I admitted. "I'd heard my father say that rumors of revolt had been circulating and that he knew Lord Ithuir was trying to get to him, but I don't think any of us saw this strategy coming. I don't even

know how he got the idea that I wasn't pureblood Fae or that I wouldn't react to the iron."

There was a shift in the set of King Lomaren's eyes that looked almost apologetic. "I didn't get to speak with the Sidhe perpetrators for long, but it seems like there was suspicion based on your...less-Fae qualities. And it also sounds like this wasn't the first time Lord Ithuir tested you by iron. He may have attempted a trial run at some point, and when he saw you didn't react, that's when he assembled a more public test."

I sucked in a breath as realization struck. The garishly-wrapped bottle of spirits. The metal beading in the layers of silk must have been made of iron. I'd completely forgotten that the council member who'd gifted the bottle to me had been none other than Lord Ithuir, but now that I knew he'd suspected my iron tolerance, I had a flashback to unwrapping the layers of silk under the strangely-glinting eyes of the half-Sidhe lord.

"'Never accept a gift from the Fae,' indeed," I muttered to myself, quoting advice frequently given among humans before the portal closed.

Humor flickered in the king's eyes. After a couple decades in the human realm, I imagined he was all too familiar with the sentiment. "Yes, I suppose so," he agreed. "Gifts given *between* Fae are usually considered safe, especially with how practiced we are with our words of exchange. But that doesn't mean especially devious tricksters can't find a way to still use those gifts against us."

The king glanced at my listless bride whom I was still supporting. "The two of you—especially Iloma there—must be exhausted at this point. Aiendir, get your clever and courageous bride back to her room for a well-deserved rest."

I nodded gratefully and turned both of us back towards Ceris's suite. By the time we got there, she was breathing heavily and resting nearly all of her weight on me. I twisted my head to look at her in concern. "Can I help you into your rooms?"

Ceris's only reply was a limp nod, so I walked her inside, where she gestured to the settee to the right, across from the stairs down to her formal sitting room. Together we sank down onto the settee, where she rested her head on my shoulder and settled in as if she had no intention of moving or letting me go. I'd planned on going back to my own rooms, but now it seemed like it was more important to be here.

As I held Ceris in my arms, I longed to ask her what happened, how she'd managed to open the portal, but there would be plenty of time for that later. Right now, she needed rest, so I took the opportunity to try to wrap my mind around the mystery of this woman I'd married. She was a highly-accomplished smuggler, a top-notch trickster, and a more powerful magician than her pedigree would suggest. *And* apparently she was deeply connected to the sacred Fae calling to care for the created world.

In essence, she was a true Fae, and her ancestors would be proud.

On the other hand, she had a heart for the vulnerable, used her intelligence to protect others, and had an unmatched loyalty, even when it cost her dearly. She amazed me, and I couldn't believe I could call her my wife. And as she rested in a state of semi-consciousness in my arms, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I loved her and needed her.

"Ceris," I murmured softly to test how alert she was.

Slowly, she lifted her head to look at me, sleepiness and curiosity commingling in her expression. “Hmm?”

“I don’t even know what to say,” I sighed. “I know you vowed to support me, but...you did more than I ever imagined. You gave me everything I ever wanted. I always wanted to be king someday. I thought I’d be good for Lianthir. But I didn’t want to do it with all the lies, and I didn’t know if ruling without this ongoing deception was even possible.”

I shifted slightly to get more comfortable, transferring a little more of Ceris’s weight onto my chest and allowing my hand to slide low on her waist, resting just above her hip. “Because of you, I now get the chance to be fully myself, no hiding my heritage or who I am. And I want you to know that it means the world to me that you made it happen.”

Ceris gave an exaggerated sigh and started squirming, slowly turning her body to face me. She buried her face in my shoulder and flung an arm across my waist. “Of course,” came her muffled voice. “I’ve heard that’s supposedly what you do for the people you love.”

My heart skipped a beat, and for several breathless seconds, I couldn’t reply. “You love me?” I finally sputtered.

“Yeah,” she growled. “You made me. Now shut up about it.”

For a moment, I sat silently, processing this news. I ran my fingers up and down her spine, hoping it relaxed her.

Several seconds later, I buried my face in her hair and whispered, “I love you, too.”

Ceris didn’t say anything, but I knew she heard me when her arm tightened possessively around my waist. It may not have been a passionate confession of adoration, but it was a

quiet, intimate moment where my heart felt more full than I ever imagined it could, holding a woman I knew loved me enough to move realms for me. And as someone who thought I'd never have a marriage of true love, I found it was nothing short of perfection.

Epilogue



Ceris

“**A**re the non-iron-free tacos everything I ever dreamed of?” I looked longingly at the street taco that hovered an inch away from Aieldir’s mouth.

Although he was still chewing, a tight smile crossed his face as he tried not to laugh and spew taco bits at me. When he finally swallowed, he replied, “I hate to tell you this, Ceris, but these are pretty amazing. Let me take a bite of yours and see if there’s a difference.”

I pulled my tacos close to my chest. “Not a chance.”

Evla rolled her eyes. “Here, Aieldir. Have a bite of mine.”

As Aieldir took a bite of Evla’s iron-free taco, I watched his face closely. He chewed slowly, thoughtfully, and then finally said, “It’s not much different, honestly.”

“He’s being nice,” Alfonso interjected with raised eyebrows.

“I knew it!” I cried.

Aieldir threw up the hand not holding his tacos. “Honestly, I’m not!”

“That’s the problem with you Fae,” Alfonso said, shaking his head. “With all that practice in tricking and cheating one another, how can you ever tell if someone is telling you the truth?”

I grimaced. “It’s a fair point, Alfonso, but is that really a good enough reason to leave us?”

Alfonso rolled his eyes as he stirred a large skillet of meat, making sure nothing stuck to the pan. “I won’t be gone forever. Kimberly and I left some unfinished business back in the human realm, and we want to check in with family. Lanasis is more than ready to take over while I’m gone.”

At the sound of his name, an enthusiastic youth with platinum hair and ears too round to have much Fae in him waved wildly at us. “It’s gonna be great!” he yelled. “I won’t let you down, Alfonso.”

Alfonso shrugged. “He’s a bit eccentric, but he’s not sensitive to iron and is actually a pretty good cook.”

One of the best parts of being the returned king’s personal hero is that I could do no wrong in his eyes. Which was quite fortunate, since as soon as he was no longer in front of the crowds, the wrath of the betrayed king had burned hot and furious against his son and daughter-in-law. It would’ve been terrifying to have been on the receiving end of that.

But since he held nothing but gratitude for me, the day after he and his men routed the Sidhe from Lianthir, Aieldir and I went ahead and told him who I was. Fortunately, despite living among humans for so long, King Lomaren was still Fae enough that he appreciated an excellent game of deception. And since I made Aieldir happy and clearly had Lianthir’s best interests at heart, he embraced my true identity with a crafty grin.

In fact—I glanced at the glass ring on my hand as I took another bite of taco—King Lomaren had insisted I hang onto the ring indefinitely. It was from him that I learned that the story about the collapse of the portal was a little different than we’d been told. Apparently, throughout the centuries since the portal was created, it was maintained by the ring drawing a small amount of magic from its wearer (who was traditionally the royal chief magician), multiplying it, and sending it back to the mirror. The two mirrors—portal and ring—were therefore inextricably connected.

However, then-Prince Ildemar and then-Princess Eirlyss had decided to take advantage of its magic-multiplying properties and give it to the very young Aiendir, hoping the magical boost would help him pass as a pure-blood Fae. King Lomaren had reluctantly allowed Aiendir to wear the ring on a trial basis, and everything seemed fine for a while. Everyone seemed comfortable allowing the young Aiendir to keep the ring indefinitely. Unfortunately, he hadn’t had the level of magic needed to sustain the portal for long, and shortly after his grandfather left for a diplomatic trip to the human realm, the mirror shattered, collapsing the portal.

Although the fate of King Lomaren was unknown, Aiendir’s opportunistic parents had spun the story to claim that the king had been killed in the destruction of the portal. They took the throne and fed their citizens the story that it was the weakness of Lianthir’s blood and magic that had caused the collapse of the portal. By doing so, they thought they were securing their own power and also the secret of their son’s heritage.

Several days ago, when the King had insisted I keep the ring, he’d explained, “Although the ring would normally go to our chief magician, the portal has made it clear that you are

worthy and powerful enough to both restore it and maintain it. You've more than earned the right to wear it."

Although the rest of us had been granted clemency by King Lomenar because of his understanding of the situations in which we'd found ourselves, Aiendir's parents weren't so fortunate. The king understood that their actions were partially motivated by the desire to protect their son, so they were going to be released after a short sentence in the prisoner's tower. However, they would be stripped of their titles, banished from the kingdom, and no longer allowed to inherit the throne, making Aiendir next in line for the crown after his grandfather.

"They stole over twenty years of my reign," King Lomenar had said quite matter-of-factly. "They've had their turn. It seems only right that they give another twenty years or so to Aiendir.

"And, per your request," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "I will be retracting nearly all the laws forbidding medicinal imports. Our neighboring kingdoms know medicine isn't our strong suit right now, but with the portal reopened and trade reestablished with the human realm, we'll be an economic powerhouse again. We may lose to the other kingdoms in magical prowess, but we'll have them all by their pursestrings!"

As for that Favor ex-King Ildemar owes me, well...it doesn't seem as useful now that he's in prison as it did when he was King of Lianthir. I think I may just save that one in my pocket in case he tries to claim power again someday. It's nice to know I have an ace up my sleeve with him.

And now, as I walked down the street with Aiendir and Evla, eating my tacos and pointing out different market booths to Aiendir, Evla gave an exaggerated sigh. "It's nice to know I

was right about the two of you,” she said with a self-satisfied smile.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, but would it have killed you to tell me earlier that you pulled me into your ridiculous scheme because you thought I’d make a good co-ruler for Aiendir?”

Aiendir snorted. “It might’ve. Because then Evla would’ve had to admit that she still felt maternal enough to want someone she thought would make me happy.” He slid me a sly smile and winked.

I was about to reply, but I spotted a jewelry vendor and remembered the cloth bundle I had in my coin purse. “Oh, I got you a little something special to commemorate your first trip to the market,” I told my husband.

Aiendir gave me a quizzical look but took the paper-wrapped taco I passed off to him to free my hands. I retrieved the bundle from my pocket and unwrapped it carefully, ignoring Evla’s smothered laughter. She knew what it was, but I couldn’t have her giving it away with her amusement.

Finally, I held out the cloth with the item displayed on top. “It’s a new collar pin!” I announced.

Aiendir’s eyes went from surprised to confused to sardonic as he eyed the small pendant hanging from the thin gold chain. “Inside the glass there, is that...is that the iron pellet from my bed?”

I gave him a sly grin. “I had it custom-made by that human jeweler right there,” I said, pointing out the vendor behind him.

Evla’s eyes lit up. “Ohh! Does she do custom work? I’ll be right back.” She rushed off, likely to commission something equally as ridiculous.

Aieldir shook his head as he took the cloth with the collar pin and passed me back my last taco. “So you don’t mind that I can’t channel enough magic to maintain my reserves *and* wear glamour at the same time anymore, now that you wear the ring?” Aieldir’s eyebrow was arched in humor, but I could tell there was insecurity underneath.

“Not at all,” I assured him. “I love your fluffy curls and softer features. I like seeing the real you.”

Aieldir didn’t say anything, but he blushed so hard that even his ears turned red.

“Oh, by the way,” I continued, “do you think there’s any wiggle room in our betrothal agreement?”

Aieldir stopped in the middle of the road, turned to me, and cocked his head to the side, concern written on his face. “Why do you ask?”

“Well,” I said slowly, “I’ve been rethinking the whole heir thing, and ...”

Aieldir’s jaw dropped in surprise, but before he could say anything, I grabbed him and kissed him soundly, right there in the middle of the marketplace.

THE END

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About the Author



When a babysitter suggested to a 5-year-old Kathryn that she ought to write a book for her parents to read when they got back from their date night, she had no idea what she'd started. After that first book about a little girl who got too sick to visit her grandparents, Kathryn never stopped writing.

Now she writes no-spice epic fantasy and fairy tale retellings for young adults, where she can indulge her love of magic, adventure, and happily-ever-afters. As someone who reads for the sake of escaping the worries of daily life and seeking imaginative joy, Kathryn writes to inspire beauty and wonder in the hearts of her readers.

