



# Kissed By Songs of Lilies

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**Category:** Romance, Fantasy, Young Adult

**Description:** Never bargain with a frog.

There was a chill in the salt air the morning my sister was taken. All they left was a single golden shell in her bed. The fae had claimed another bride.

Now, careless on champagne, I've met one myself. By night, an intoxicating gentleman with piercing green eyes. By day, a slimy, conniving frog.

When I drop my precious golden shell, he offers to retrieve it... for a price. By his law, we are betrothed.

To break a bargain is to die, so I will cross the cursed waters with him and go to their hidden isle. But this won't be a one-way trip. It won't be so easy to claim the heart of this princess.

**Total Pages (Source):** 92

## CHAPTER 1

### The Stolen Bride

I woke to rain lashing my window panes. Outside, the sky was red on the horizon—a bad omen.

Still, it wouldn't stop the festivities tonight. Another blighted ball.

I turned over in my bed and groaned into my pillow. Another day wasted with preparations. Another evening ruined by mindless pleasantries and idle gossip.

The summer social season lasted four long months, and my father, the ruler of our seaside kingdom, wouldn't rest until I'd attended every single event.

To be more concise, he wouldn't rest until I'd made an advantageous marriage. I shook the unwelcome thought from my mind and stared out at the familiar rain-soaked landscape.

I was no stranger to storms. I knew the sea's lullaby—heavy, rolling waves and fierce winds. I'd heard lightning crack, felt thunder shake the ground, and watched ancient trees ripped from the earth.

When I was little, the storms frightened me. I would sit up in bed and cry while my fearless older sister jumped on our feather bed, telling me to hush.

Nonetheless, mamma always came. She would bring a candle, gather us in her arms,

and tell us stories of long ago. Stories of the fae who brought storms and stole brides.

I never thought I would become one of those stories.

That night, the air was filled with laughter and conversation. Men and women from all over our seaside kingdom gathered to dance and make meaningful connections—romantic and political.

The sound of their merriment traveled out of the crowded, stuffy ballroom, through the French doors, across the patio and the tower of champagne, and into the ancient grove of trees beyond.

I longed to follow it.

I longed for freedom.

It was a wicked thought. My mother was dead. My father, my sister, my kingdom—they all depended on me and my prospective marriage. I couldn't let them down.

So, my younger sister, Magnolia, and I stood dutifully at the entrance of the ballroom, greeting our guests. The arrivals were becoming more spaced now.

Magnolia wiped a trickle of sweat from the back of her neck. "Do you think anyone would miss us if we went to the refreshment table?"

I looked up at the grand clock, its golden hands ticking in quiet synchronization. "It's scarcely past seven. We should wait a few more minutes."

Magnolia's lip poked out in a subtle pout that reminded me of when she was younger. "All of these people are late. Why should they receive a formal greeting?" she

grumbled.

"Maggie," I admonished.

She gave me her best puppy dog eyes. "Georgia," she whined. "I know you don't want to stand here any more than I do. It's so humid I could float to the refreshment table."

I couldn't help but smile. "You're right. It's dreadful, isn't it?"

As we moved to abandon our post, a familiar voice drawled, "Why, Georgia, Magnolia!"

I turned and spotted Lady Catherine at the ballroom entry. Her gown's hoop skirt protruded at least a foot on each side, and its silver brocade accented her graying hair. She waved merrily at my sister and I.

Was it too late to pretend I hadn't seen her? Magnolia seemed to have the same thought because she kept walking. I gently grasped her wrist and tugged her back. Her shoulders sagged in disappointment.

Privately, Maggie called her Lady Cat because once she cornered you, there was no escape. Just like a cat with a mouse, she could happily torment you for hours.

"Hello, my darlings. I do apologize for being late," she said. "You know how hard it can be to get out the door."

Having stood in this doorway for nearly an hour, I imagined I knew it far better than her. I smiled nonetheless. "It's no trouble. We're pleased you could make it. You are well, I hope?"

"Oh, yes. Incredibly so. And your family?" she inquired, glancing around the ballroom, likely to take inventory of tonight's guest list.

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"Yes, thank you. We are all well. Father is in excellent health. How is your daughter? I believe she was recently married."

She beamed at me. "Very well, indeed. The Duke is a fitting husband for my sweet Angelica. I always did say she was the prettiest of her age, excluding present company, of course."

"Of course," I replied through a thin smile. I hated how everyone was always scrutinizing my appearance and temperament. Was I fashionable? Was my face pleasing? How was my manner? Was I haughty or humble?

My governess had tried to counsel me on which traits would secure a fetching husband, a fabulous fortune, and a beneficial alliance for our kingdom. However, I proved to be a poor student.

I just wanted to be myself.

But I was afraid the real me wasn't enough. I enjoyed reading late into the night, allowing the candles to burn down to their wicks. I liked being with Magnolia and running through the woods. I liked digging my hands into the soil and gardening.

Sadly, I was fairly certain much of this would be considered "below my station" at best and "wild" at worst.

I wasn't fit to rule a kingdom.

It was always supposed to be fearless Briar, my older sister, but she was gone now. I

shook the melancholy thought from my mind and tried to focus on the conversation at hand.

Magnolia was rapidly steering said conversation toward her favorite topic. "Do you have any news from the harbor?" she asked curiously.

It was one of the benefits of talking to Lady Catherine. Her husband was a wealthy merchant, so she knew everything going on at the harbor—which ships had come to port, which ships had never returned, any new or unique products in the market, and stories of the fae and their terrible island.

"Tragic news, I'm afraid," she said, glancing around and lowering her voice.

Whatever she knew wasn't polite party conversation. My interest was immediately piqued. "Oh?" I asked.

She motioned us closer. "Another abduction at the marketplace. This time, two children were taken."

"How dreadful," I said softly. My heart ached for the family. I knew how hard it was to lose someone you loved. I thought again of my elder sister, Briar.

Maggie asked, "And it was them?"

Lady Cat nodded. "Their father made a bargain with one of the folk. They say he didn't mean to trade the children, but you know how it is, he got the wording wrong."

My sister and I both nodded. We knew the stories. The fae brought nothing but destruction. Their storms had battered our coastline for generations. No one wise sought them out.

If you were unwise, you could find them in the market, selling their wares for a secret or a whispered price. No coins were accepted. Instead, you would pay with something far more precious—your laugh, your most cherished memory, your old age, your greatest secret, your first love, a single tear, or a lock of baby hair. If you offered them gold instead, it would turn to sand and slip through your fingers.

This man had paid dearly indeed.

My sister lowered her voice. "His nightmare may not be over. If they have taken the children, they may yet be replaced."

My mouth dropped open in horror. I hardly dared to speak that word aloud.

"Changelings," Maggie whispered.

Sometimes, the fae would steal a human child and replace them with a changeling, a fae child. It was their cruelest trick. At first, some parents were fooled, but most knew within days. While the child looked exactly the same, little clues would emerge. Suddenly, the child's favorite food would make them sick or their hair that had always been parted to the left might move to the right.

Once the parents knew, things often escalated. The fae child could become volatile, malignant, or restless. If they became terribly angry, it was rumored their eyes would turn black. To toss them out was to risk the wrath of the fae and guarantee your own child would never be returned. I couldn't imagine the pain of looking into the eyes of a near perfect facsimile of your child, only to meet a stranger's gaze.

Lady Cat shook her head as if it were all too much for her. "A grim business. Now, princesses, you must promise you will never, ever visit their markets. If you encounter a fae, hold your tongue. A word may cost you your life."



We nodded. We knew this. Every child in our kingdom knew this.

Yet, somehow, people were always ensnared. How? Why?

Another twenty minutes passed as Lady Cat told us every imaginable detail of this season's new fashions.

I found my mind wandering back to the patio and its welcoming breeze and star-studded night sky. I bet it was cooler out there.

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The truth was I didn't want to stop on the patio. I wanted to keep going. I wanted to go deeper and deeper into the canopy of trees and underbrush until I could scarcely find my way back again.

It was a wicked thought. My father, my sister, my kingdom—they all needed me.

Maggie stomped on my foot, startling me away from my thoughts and back into the ballroom. "Ow!" I cried.

Lady Cat blinked at me in concern. "Are you quite alright, princess?"

"I, um, yes. I mean no..."

My sister, always a better liar, came to my rescue. "Oh, she looks positively faint. She really should sit down."

"It must be the heat," Lady Cat lamented. "Get her a glass of something cool and have her rest for at least two dances."

My sister bobbed her head obediently. "Yes, Lady Cat—Catherine," she corrected herself.

We hurried away. A line had formed at the punch bowl where men and women were imbibing perhaps more than was socially acceptable in their quest to beat the heat. The temperature would have been unbearable if it weren't for the open doors and windows, allowing a distant ocean breeze to ebb and flow.

Unfortunately, we walked straight into another obstacle, our father. Tonight he was acting as king, host, and apparently matchmaker. He wasn't alone. By his side stood a stout, strong man, likely in his mid-forties.

Upon spotting us, my father opened his arms in welcome. I tried not to cringe. I knew exactly who this man was—another suitor.

"Ah, my two darling daughters. At last. Allow me to introduce our guest, Regent Callahan. He has traveled far to be here with us tonight." My father held my gaze meaningfully. His intent was clear. This man was an advantageous match, and I should act accordingly.

I forced my lips into a smile and inclined my head in deference. "If I'm not mistaken, your dress denotes you are from Frost Haven. Is that so?"

He looked pleased that I knew something about him. Encouraged, his eyes ran up and down my figure appraisingly. I supposed he liked what he saw because he licked his lips and asked, "Might I claim your next dance?"

My stomach turned. This man was more than twice my age, and everything about him felt wrong. I didn't like the way he looked at me, lingering on my breasts. I didn't want to dance with him. I certainly didn't want to marry him.

But our riches wouldn't last forever. The fae's storms ravaged our shores. The cost to rebuild and survive was high. Our kingdom had no male heir and no clear line of succession.

And so, I danced.

## CHAPTER 2

## The Fae King

Heavy is the head that wears the crown. No truer words have ever been spoken, especially when one is a twice-cursed fae king with more adversaries than dinner plates.

I was trying to relax in my bedchamber and enjoy the blissful nothingness of a goblet of wine. Yet, my oldest friend and most loyal servant was insistent that I listen to him.

"Your council of advisors is talking," he warned.

I sighed and stared out at the moonlight dancing across the distant ocean waves. Couldn't my council just leave me in peace? Didn't they have enough years of experience and political finesse to leave me alone for just a few days?

But my friend, Harry, wasn't going to let this go, so I replied, "Isn't that what advisors are supposed to do?"

He ran a nervous hand through his light brown curly hair. "That's not-"

I held up my hand. "Peace, Harry. I understand your intent. What did they call me this time? A drunk, a womanizer, a worthless heir? I've heard it all before."

Of course, I had. It was part of my plan. If they believed I was a spoiled king who overindulged, they might brush away my frequent absences. I couldn't let any of them know how I truly spent my days.

Harry shook his head. "That's not what they're saying."

I heard the sliver of fear in his tone, and I turned to face him. We'd known each other

since we were boys. I knew that tone, and it spelled trouble. "What are they saying?" I prompted.

"Soul rot." The words slipped through his teeth like poison. "They believed you may have soul rot, my king."

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The words hit me like a punch to the gut. Was I really doing such a poor job of masking? Could they so easily see behind my false smiles and feigned energy? The stories of drink and women? Did they... see me?

A thrill of terror ripped through me, and dread began to pool in my stomach. "Were they sincere?" I asked.

A measure of relief crossed his face. "Not yet. It was merely one of numerous possibilities bandied about."

"Then it's fine," I said hopefully.

He frowned. "There was silence after the suggestion. No one laughed."

"So, they considered it?"

He nodded slowly. "I think they'll be watching more carefully from now on."

"Damn them. Who started such dangerous talk?" I demanded.

"Hawthorne."

I nodded. "It has long been rumored he maintains more than a casual connection with the unseelie court. He'd like nothing more than to see my reign end. I should have banished him long ago."

"It would be easier for him to work in shadows than light," Harry reminded me.

"The idea was to keep him close. Not give him the means to sway my own advisory council against me." I paused and took a swig from my goblet. "Is there anything you can do to end the rumors?"

"Any interference on my part would only give his claim legitimacy."

I nodded. "Of course. Then it is up to me."

"You?" he echoed.

I should have been offended by the surprise on his face, but I wasn't. The truth was I'd rather end this conversation and return to bed. I could sink beneath the covers, drown myself in drink, and stare up at the blighted stars.

The ones that had cursed my fate.

He turned to me with concern. Slowly, uncertainly, he said, "I know this curse weighs upon you. I know the realm does too. But you don't have... you'd say if..."

I glared at him, leaving his question unanswered.

He bowed. A formality we usually skipped. "I'll take my leave then. If there's anything I can do, if..." he trailed off and then turned away.

"Thank you," I said weakly as the door closed between us.

So, my advisors believed I had soul rot.

I snagged my goblet and made the slow procession to my inner chambers. I collapsed into my four-poster bed. No longer desiring the company of my council or any other. Not that night.

Soul rot was when melancholy ate away at a fae's spirit, withering their essence until it crackled like decomposing leaves and blew away on the wind. A nasty business. Gruesome even for those who attended to the rotting.

A death sentence.

My death sentence.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Fae King

I had little time to act on the startling revelations of the evening. I hadn't even decided on a course of action. Part of me hoped the problem would simply go away.

It was still early in the morning. Day had not yet broken. Despite that, someone was pounding on my chamber doors. Who would dare wake their king?



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I wiped the sleep from my eyes. Only a select few had access to my personal quarters, and only one would dare disturb my slumber.

Harry.

Sure enough, his familiar voice rang out, "It's urgent."

I pulled on a dressing gown and grumbled, "Enter."

Without hesitation, he threw open the doors and panted, "Queen Liliana of the Sun Court has arrived. She awaits your audience."

"Queen Liliana?" I repeated.

He nodded. "She's only just arrived."

"But why? She's not on my schedule." And even if she were, I'd have never scheduled her at this hour. I stared at him pointedly. "Are you aware of the time?"

I had more troubles than just the soul rot that might kill me. I was twice cursed, and there was a troublesome time limitation involved in the second.

"Forrest, I know."

"And yet..."

He sighed. "She is of the Sun Court. You know they retire at sunfall. If you are to

accommodate her, it must be now."

"We have but minutes," I insisted. "Send one of the advisors instead."

He bit his lip. "I considered this. Unfortunately, the first to volunteer was Hawthorne. The others approved it."

I groaned. "We can't send him."

"I know," Harry repeated.

I took a deep breath and then released it all at once. "Fine, but we must move quickly."

"The kitchens have already been alerted. Her ladies-in-waiting as well. She will meet you out on the Sunrise Veranda. You need only get dressed."

The Sunrise Veranda was a part of my private wing. That meant I could return to my chambers quickly, and should something go wrong, few would see. Harry had truly thought of everything. I nodded my agreement.

"I'll serve the ladies tea while you dress," he said.

"Move swiftly," I warned.

"Same to you," he said as he disappeared out the door.

Not ten minutes later, I was sitting in twilight. Will-o'-the-wisps vanished and reappeared like lightning bugs on the dark horizon. Candles burned on an elegantly dressed table.

Queen Liliana was waiting. She rose as I approached. "My dear, Forrest," she greeted me. "I am surprised to be welcomed so early in the morning. I was under the impression your court slept in."

I kissed her hands and gave her my most charming grin. I am a fae, so of course, I couldn't lie. However, the right truths found their way to my lips with ease. "Queen Liliana, when I heard the news of your arrival, it was all I could do to stop from running down the hall."

Indeed, I did force my footsteps to remain slow and steady. For, I had minutes, not hours, before this entire sham fell apart.

Upon the sun's rise, I would turn into a frog.

Many fae changed forms. The selkies changed from women into seals. It was rumored a nearby court's princess changed into a swan. However, my change was not elective.

I bore a witch's curse.

From sunrise until sunfall, I became a frog.

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If I were discovered, my rule would be over. Our realm would fall to the unseelie. They would enter us into a millennium of terrible storms, ruthlessly battering the isle, the coral reefs, and the human settlement too. A fate I could not allow.

My heart beat frantically, but I listened to the steady crash of ocean waves in the distance. It calmed me, and I smiled pleasantly at Queen Liliana. "To what do I owe this unexpected visit?"

"I'd like to be frank with you. I know my visit is unplanned, and I do not wish to take up more of your time than is necessary."

"Speak freely then." And quickly, I thought.

"My youngest sister is to be married to one of the Autumn Court."

I nodded. "Go on."

"She will travel through your harbor." She paused.

I frowned, cocking my head to the side. "You needn't have made the trip for such a minor request. You know we'll permit your sister safe passage across our waters. Our courts have been at peace for a long time now."

"Yes, I know, but..." She trailed off, looking uncertain.

I was running out of time. I needed her to get to the point, and at this rate, she never would. "Liliana, how many years have we known each other? Simply make your

request."

She nodded, seemingly summoning her courage.

I have to admit I was curious what required such secrecy. It wasn't Liliana's way. Court politics had never been her strong suit. She was too kindhearted for fae royalty. Yet, it endeared her to many, and her cabinet fiercely defended her from those who sought to take advantage.

Finally, she blurted, "I need her trip delayed!"

Ah, it was a family matter then. Something about marriage. I didn't see any reason to deny her. I doubted the Autumn Court would hold me accountable for a runaway bride, and my acquiescence would likely end this meeting. "How long?" I asked.

She sighed in relief, and I noticed even her shoulders seemed to relax. "Only two days. That will be enough."

"Consider it done," I said, beginning to stand.

"Really?" She squinted. "You have no request in return?"

"We have been friends for more moons than I care to count. I won't ask you why. One day I may ask a favor, and I ask only that you graciously listen."

She leaped out of her chair and kissed both my cheeks.

I gave her a fond smile and pushed my chair back from the table. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have a prior engagement." It was true, if unspecific.

Once rushed farewells were exchanged and I was through the doors, it took

everything I had not to transform right there. I could feel the change ripping through my body. Holding it off was excruciating. Pain tore through my nerves, starting in my fingers and trailing up my hands and arms.

I staggered down the hall, and a sheen of sweat broke out across my forehead. More dripped down my neck, sticking my white tunic shirt to my back.

By the time I made it to my chamber, Harry was close behind.

I collapsed onto my bed. I was briefly in and out of consciousness when I felt his hands on my shirt, loosening my collar. A welcome respite except...

"No!" I said, clamping my hand on his. My grip was steel.

I was too late. Harry sucked in a rattling gasp. His mouth dropped open in an expression of grief and horror.

I followed his eyes to my own chest. Small black dots formed on my skin, encircling my heart. The telltale signs of soul rot.

"It's true," he whispered.

"Yes," I said, unwilling to bother denying it or rising from my bed for that matter.

"Why did you return?" I prompted after several still minutes.

"Hawthorne. He demands a reply to a bit of paperwork, but I will put him off. You rest."

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Just then, the sun broke over the horizon— bright and triumphant. Its victory over me was immediate. The change ripped through the very core of my being, and I couldn't hold it off any longer.

I transformed from a powerful fae king into a common bullfrog— the sort of frog that often inhabited our marshes. My skin was a rich, varied green, my legs were strong and made for leaping, and I had a long, sticky tongue for catching insects.

I groaned and buried my tiny face in my sheets. I tried not to let my daily change distract me from my annoyance with Hawthorne and his probing. He didn't really have urgent paperwork. He was testing me. Aloud, I grumbled, "Can't we just stab him and have done?"

"I suppose we could, but his connections may prove useful."

I slowly lowered the pillow and nodded. "Then I'll meet with him." I rose.

"Sir," he stopped me.

"Do I look that bad?"

He bit his lip.

All the answer I needed.

"You cannot lay here like this. You cannot lose hope. You are needed."

Through my exhaustion, anger reared its ugly head. I snapped at him, my only remaining friend, my only true ally. "Then should I brush my hair one thousand times in the mirror? Bathe in the finest sea salts? Adorn my skin with pearls? Ask the selkies to procure me a mermaid's scale for vitality?"

"No but-"

"Then what's the point?" I demanded.

He stared at me, and I could see he was about to lose his temper. Finally, he burst out, "You fool. You are dying."

I sighed. "What would you have me do? The witch is dead. I've consulted dozens more. Not one of them can break the curse."

"The curse is not what formed those marks," he hissed.

"You want me to find joy? If only I could. Reach out my hand and grasp it. Like a will-o'-the-wisp, warm and bright, its glow to keep me whole. But alas, it is not so."

"You will die," he repeated.

I clenched my jaw. "Maybe I shall."

"You selfish, arrogant ass. If you die, what becomes of us? Do you think the unseelie will rule as you do?"

"Go see to Liliana and her court. Make sure they're well treated. Keep Hawthorne as far away as possible."

It was an order, and he knew it.



He bowed and left the room.

I was alone with my thoughts once more. There was no worse company. Harry really was a fine servant, an even better friend. It was too bad about the iron band around his heart. I hadn't been the only victim that terrible day. Harry had been cursed too. As long as the band remained, he would never fall in love.

He had been right, too. I was being selfish. Giving up on myself, giving up on my life—it was a luxury I didn't have. The island needed me. My people needed me. Even those wretched humans needed me.

There was only one choice. Change or die.

Many hours later, Harry returned, looking worn and tired. "Liliana and her visiting court members have enjoyed a full day of activities. They're retiring to their rooms for the evening."

"Well done," I said, clapping him on the back.

His eyes raked over me, regarding me with surprise. "You're dressed."

Had it really been so long since I had dressed properly? I supposed it had. Nonetheless, I ignored his pointed comment. "I'm off to find a bride. I'll be back in a few days. See to affairs here." I stared at my fingernails, attempting to give off an indolent, unconcerned air.

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"A bride?" he echoed.

"A bride," I confirmed. "And an end to this wretched curse once and for all."

I started to stride away when he called out, "Where will you stay?"

I chuckled. "Oh, I assume they have ponds, too—the mortals."

### CHAPTER 4

#### The Stolen Bride

Finally, I had my chance to escape.

After hours of pleasantries and unwanted dances, the orchestra was winding down. Couples were parting on the dance floor. Soon, everyone would gather at the refreshment table, filling their cups and dance cards for the next round.

I moved carefully along the edges of the stifling, hot room, trying not to draw undue attention to myself. After all, I was the hostess. It was impolite for me to even consider leaving.

But outside, the hum of the night—cicadas, bullfrogs, trickling fountains, and the ocean breeze—called to me. It cast a spell on me I couldn't ignore.

I made a beeline for my younger sister, grabbed her hand, and tugged her toward the open french doors. She followed instantly. This wasn't the first ball we had snuck out

of this summer, and it was unlikely to be the last.

A sheer curtain blew invitingly in the breeze. We stepped out onto the cobblestone patio. A pyramid of champagne flutes waited on an elegant, linen-draped table. With no one looking, I snagged two glasses and then an entire bottle of champagne.

My sister grinned and pulled me through a gap in the rose bushes. Then she took off at a run, sloshing her glass of ill-gotten champagne. I followed, running and laughing. For once, I didn't try to restrain myself or seek to be the perfect princess my father and kingdom needed.

We traveled under the old moss-strewn trees, past the ornate fountain, and down the lane. When our stately home became small in the distance, I threw my head back and laughed, spinning and sipping and looking up at the stars with my sister's hand in mine. I felt so free.

"Beautiful," I heard someone whisper.

I whipped my head around, but I didn't see anyone. I shook my head. I was worrying about nothing. No one had followed us. Even if they had, we would soon lose them in the thick undergrowth.

My sister and I detoured into the low brush. No doubt my hemline would be filthy, and I could feel briars catching the delicate fabric of my gown. I didn't care. Not really. Soon, we wound our way to our favorite spot—a pond with an old weathered dock. It was hidden away from the main path and blanketed under the stars.

I wasn't acting my age. I certainly wasn't acting my station.

On my next birthday, there would be no more balls. There would be a marriage instead. I had met the men I would likely marry, and I wasn't interested in any of

them. Tonight's new addition was no exception.

I shook those thoughts from my cluttered mind. That day wasn't today. Overhead, the stars shone in an inky black sky, and I was grateful to be free.

In our hidden spot, I kicked back the entire glass of champagne, and the bubbles went straight to my head. My sister, only fifteen, did the same, but I took the last half of the glass. "You're not old enough to have but a sip," I teased before downing her glass, too.

She groaned, but then her eyes lit up with mischief. My sister was nothing if not absolute trouble. One day, I feared she would bring herself to ruin. "Let's take a dip like we used to," she said with a grin. "This fabric barely breathes."

I couldn't agree more about the fabric. It was a stifling hot summer evening, and the air was as thick as molasses. Before I could answer, she undressed down to her shift and cannonballed into the smooth pond, forming ripples across the water.

I looked around; there were none but the crickets to see us. Maybe the bubbles had gone to my head, for I convinced Maggie to come back out and loosen the laces on the back of my gown. I stripped down, draped my ball gown across a tree branch, and submerged myself in the water. We floated on our backs, sighing and replaying the night's highlights.

I saw small golden eyes glowing on the other side of the water. So many creatures lived here—turtles, foxes, rabbits, birds, frogs. One eye winked at me, and I laughed and winked back.

I hadn't felt so carefree since... No, I mustn't think of my elder sister. My hand immediately went to stroke my golden shell necklace, the one I always wore, the one containing a mere echo of my lost sister, stolen by the fae five years ago. I wore this

golden shell always—a precious memory.

When I held the shell to my ear, I could hear her final words to us. There was no sound of a skirmish, nor a plea to find her, nothing mysterious or uncertain, just... I love you.

I submerged my head under the water, hoping to free myself of this seeping melancholy. I arranged my long, golden hair to fall behind me and emerged. Then, I heard a branch snap.

"Maggie?" I called, searching the underbrush for my sister.

Instead, I saw her floating on the water blissfully several feet away. My head jerked toward the bank, and I saw the vile boy, Eldon, the third son of the archduke. Just seventeen and more immature than a schoolboy, he had followed us here.

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"Be gone," I shouted, feeling my cheeks turn crimson. I sank beneath the water.

He snatched the nearest dress from a tree and took off into the forest. I could hardly follow in my state. Luckily, my sister's gown remained. She hurried from the water, wrung out her hair, and shimmied back into her gown, grinning. "Don't worry. I'll chase him down yet."

"That's not what I was worried about," I breathed as I watched her retreat. I was not worried for myself but for her. I should never have gone along with this swim. Now, my only remaining sister was traipsing through the dark alone.

I clung to the dock, my heart in my hands.

I didn't wait long. Moments later, I heard my father's booming voice in the distance. "What are you doing out here? Is your sister with you?"

"No, papa."

"Then where is she?"

"You know her. She snuck back to her room to read by candlelight."

He grunted. "Get back to the palace immediately. Go through the servants' entrance. If your departed mother could see you..."

I heard footsteps as they walked away. There was no help coming now. I would have to find my way back to our mansion in my shift.

Foolish. Reckless. I chastised myself.

The party must be nearly over if father had excused himself to find us. Perhaps, I could sneak up my trellis and through my window, as if I were but sixteen when I was twenty years old.

I swam a few laps, considering my options. There was nothing for it. I could not stay here.

Then I heard someone clear their throat. I looked around, expecting my sister or perhaps that beast Eldon. Instead, I saw a tall man with piercing green eyes and an adorned cloak. He was handsome.

Suddenly, I came to my senses. I was dressed in a shift, and from where I stood in the water, my collarbone and the tops of my bosom were exposed. The fabric stuck to my silhouette, leaving no curve to the imagination. Any hint of modesty or decorum was lost. I felt my face and chest flush in embarrassment.

Before I could speak, he said, "Forgive the intrusion."

"I should be the one apologizing," I said in a rush of breath. "It's just so hot out this evening, and my sister and I?—"

"Ah, the girl with wet hair. I saw her at a distance."

My heart quickened. "Was she okay?"

"Naturally. She was near the palace doors when I turned onto this path. What's happened to your gown?"

"It was stolen," I admitted, my cheeks flushing.

His lip quirked upward in a sliver of a smile. "Stolen? It's unusual to see highway robbers so far from the open road."

Was he teasing me?

"I'm afraid I do not have a spare gown. However, I am more than happy to lend you my cloak."

His eyes were striking, a bright green, and his hair was as dark and shiny as a crow's wing.

Without thinking, I waded toward the shore, my shift clinging to my body and nearly see-through. My bosom, stomach, and strong thighs were visible. Finally, I stepped onto the bank and reached out a hand to accept his cloak. Then I pulled back, realizing what I had just done. What had come over me?

I caught the faintest flicker of a smile before he turned his back modestly and held out his cloak.

I accepted it from his long, nimble fingers. My hands swept gently against his. His were smooth, not the sort that did hard labor. He was a noble, royal, or gentry. Not a commoner. Not staff. As his hand brushed mine to hand me the cloak, I could feel the buzz of more than alcohol on my skin. Pure electricity. He excited something within me. Something dormant until now. Something wild.

Who was this man? If he was a guest, a noble, a suitor, perhaps my fate was not so glum as I had imagined. I shook my head. Was this all it took to shake my resolve? One handsome face. One small act of kindness.

I would not give up on my dream. Somehow, I would find my lost sister. Then she could marry and rule. I would be more than happy to return to my rightful place as



the middle sister. Pretty enough but easily eclipsed in style and charm.

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To my surprise, his cloak was lightweight and long. It should well conceal my figure.

He brought my hand to his parted lips but rather than kiss the top, he turned it over and kissed the inside of my wrist gently. "I'm glad we met, princess," he said.

Then, he was gone. I followed the forest path, stuck to the trees, and climbed the trellis to my own window. There was a note from my sister and a lit candle waiting.

Father knows nothing. Sorry to leave you.

I breathed a sigh of relief that she was safe. I blew out all of the candles. In the last flicker of the flame, I thought of those piercing green eyes.

## CHAPTER 5

### The Stolen Bride

The memory found me, even in my dreams.

It was a cold, winter morning. The sun hadn't risen yet, and I lay nestled under a thick goose down comforter.

I woke to a piercing scream in the hallway. I scrambled out of bed to see what was the matter. From the hallway, I heard sounds in my older sister's bedroom.

"Briar," I called at her door.

There was no reply, so I pushed my way in.

I knew at once that something was wrong. Terribly wrong. Every window in her room was open. The cold, salty air wrapped around me like a chilly embrace, tickling my neck and tugging on the small strands of hair at the nape of my neck.

I shivered.

Though day was only just beginning to break, every candle in the room had been blown out. Through the shadow, my sister was nowhere to be seen. The comforter on her bed was thrown back, and her bed was empty.

Well, almost empty.

On the tousled sheets lay a golden shell.

Soon, more servants entered the room, then Maggie, and finally my father. He took one look at the awful scene and let out a gut-wrenching moan. Only one type of intruder would leave a shell— the fae.

Moments later, we were entrusted into our childhood nursemaid's care and locked in the root cellar. It was dark and smelled of earth. Our only light source, a lantern, flickered, revealing fear in our nursemaid's eyes.

We huddled together under a heap of blankets and listened to the barreling footsteps overhead. Men were searching our home and grounds. Even as I hoped, as I prayed, father would return with Briar, I knew all was lost.

Our men would never find her. She had been taken to the fae's island, and she would never return. They said every generation a bride was stolen. They said it calmed the storms.

But I didn't care. I just wanted my sister back. My fearless, clever Briar.

I held the golden shell to my ear, the one I had found on her bed. I only heard a faint echo of my sister's voice. "I love you," she said.

I woke and ran a hand across my collarbone, seeking the golden shell which I had turned into a necklace. I wanted to listen to that distant echo of my sister's voice, but it wasn't there. My heart quickened. I sat up and searched under my pillow and among the linens. It was missing, and I knew at once where I had lost it—the pond.

I wouldn't be allowed to simply leave through the front doors, and I couldn't tell my father what had transpired last night. The sun had just risen, and there was enough light to see outdoors. So, I gathered my skirts and crawled out the window.

Carefully, I stuck one slippered foot into the trellis and then the next. Then, with the precision of a skilled escape artist—which I supposed I was—I climbed alongside the jasmine until I reached the ground.

I hurried down the dusty drive, through the oak grove and underbrush, and out to the hidden pond.

I hated myself every step of the way. Foolish. Careless.

When I looked out at the murky pond water, I almost broke down and cried. How would I ever find it?

Determined not to quit, I shimmied off my dress and dove in, running my hands along the bottom of the pond. I sifted through silt and shell fragments, hoping to feel the cool metal of the golden chain.

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I resurfaced. A whimper escaped my throat.

I dove again and again. I forgot the palace. I forgot my father and his staff who would soon be looking for me. All I could think of was Briar and the shell that contained a tiny echo of her voice, one that would never age nor fade nor leave me.

I couldn't lose this last precious piece of her.

If it was gone, it would be like she was gone. Not waiting somewhere to be rescued. Not living as a fae bride. But gone. Forever. Never to return.

I was breathless from diving, and my heart fluttered like a sparrow.

Finally, I dragged myself out of the water and lay on the weathered dock. I looked hopelessly across the murky pond and began to cry. It started with a single tear but built to a crescendo of despair.

A large bullfrog leapt out of the water and landed on the dock next to me. I grimaced at the sight of him—slimy and wet. Absolutely disgusting. The last thing I needed.

Then I heard someone clear their throat. I sat up and straightened my back at once, looking around for the source of the noise. Had one of my father's servants found me so quickly?

"Why are you crying, princess?" asked a low, rumbling voice.

"I've lost my necklace," I said, turning to see who had joined me.

There was no one in sight. That was when I realized the voice was coming from the frog. I let out a piercing scream.

He hopped backward as if to avoid me should I choose to slam my hand downward. Not a poor impulse.

I caught my breath and steadied myself. This was clearly the work of powerful witchcraft. The frog himself could be a witch, or he could be the object of one's ire. Either way, it was best not to intervene.

I stood up.

"Wait," said the frog. His voice was oddly commanding, regal even.

Something about it made me pause.

"I can assist you," he said.

"I don't see how," I replied, taking another step backward. I wanted to put some distance between us.

"You seem to have lost something. Perhaps, I could find it for you," offered the frog. "I can see easily in the water."

I wanted to jump at his offer, but something was off. "Why would you help me?" I asked.

"Why wouldn't I help you?" he replied. "Has no one ever done you a good turn before? How sad."

"No," I admitted. "People usually want something from me."

"Would you be more comfortable if I did, too?"

I considered him for a moment before nodding. "Yes."

"Fine. I will make a request then. If I find your necklace, I wish to live by your side. This pond has very little in the way of riches."

So, he wanted riches. That wasn't a problem. I had an armoire full of jewelry and a sack of gold coins. I would gladly trade them all to hear my sister's voice.

I smiled. "You have a deal."

The frog nodded once and dove nimbly into the water.

Ten minutes later, he returned with a golden chain in his mouth, the shell floating neatly behind him.

I snatched it out of the water and clutched it to my chest, crying happy tears.

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*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 10:11 am*

"And now for the matter of my payment," prompted the frog.

I nodded. "What items would you like? I have gold and jewelry."

"You promised I could stay by your side."

I couldn't bring a frog into the palace, especially a talking one! My father would never permit such blatant sorcery. I frowned. "I cannot allow you to stay by my side, but I can provide you with riches. Name it, and it shall be yours."

If it was possible, the frog looked angry. His bulbous eyes were narrowed, so that only black slits showed. He emitted a terrible, furious screech. Then he said, "I have already named my price."

## CHAPTER 6

### The Stolen Bride

Clearly, there was no reasoning with frogs.

So, I did what any reasonable woman would—ran home and hoped never to return to the pond again.

Later that evening, I joined my father at the dinner table. Outside, the sun was setting, and the trees were swaying in a gentle wind. It would be a good night to sit on one of our large covered porches.



Magnolia was running late, a common occurrence, and we were just about to start our first course without her.

"No sense is letting the food grow cold," my father said.

I draped my napkin in my lap and was poised to take my first bite of lamb when we were interrupted by a loud knock on the front door.

"Who would knock at the dinner hour? And unannounced?" my father boomed.

The knocking didn't stop. It was loud and insistent. Finally, my father gave a permissive wave, and a servant left to answer the door.

The servant returned with the man from the pond, the one who had so gallantly gifted me his traveling cloak, the man with piercing green eyes and magnetic pull.

I blushed and smiled up at him uncertainly.

He didn't look at me. Instead, he turned toward my father. "Your daughter has promised me her hand in marriage. I've come to collect her."

My mouth fell open. How could he say such a thing? I ran through our entire conversation from the night before, trying to think of anything I might have said to mislead him. I hadn't even accepted a dance, certainly not a marriage proposal.

Finally, I came to my senses and declared, "I have made no such promise!"

My father sat in stunned silence. His eyes flicked between me and the man, trying to understand what was happening. After a long moment, he stood and walked toward the man. "Who are you?"

The man's green eyes glimmered as he replied, "A powerful man. One you do not wish to have as your enemy."

My father raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Are you with one of the visiting kingdoms? What is your name?"

He ignored my father's question. "I asked your daughter to stay with me always, and she consented. She disrobed in front of me."

My father glanced back at me, but he didn't meet my eyes.

My cheeks were beet red, and if I could have dissolved into a puddle and seeped through the palace floor, I would have done so at once. How dare he invite himself into our home, approach my father at our table, and attempt to malign my virtue in some misguided proposal?

"She accepted jewelry," he continued.

"What?" I gasped out loud. I hadn't taken jewelry from him, only a cloak and one I would be more than happy to return. Anything to see this stranger out of my house.

"This afternoon by the pond," he added with a wicked grin.

My father held up a silencing hand. "No more. Daughter, what say you?"

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I felt my gut drop. This afternoon... by the pond... accepted jewelry. I knew what was happening now. Last night, this man's pull had felt magnetic, magical even. I had walked out of the pond in naught but a wet shift. I had let him kiss the inside of my wrist. I had fallen asleep thinking of him.

Now, as he stood before me, I looked past his glamour and noticed the inhuman glint of his bright green eyes and sharp, pointed ears.

This man was the frog.

Worse, he was... "fae," I hissed.

Sick dread pooled in my stomach. How could I have been so reckless? I began to replay our entire conversation from the pond. What exactly had I promised?

My father's face turned as red as his handlebar mustache, and he barreled forward to stand directly between me and my unwanted suitor. "No waterwalker will steal my Georgia. You already have one of my daughters. You will not take another." He looked like a wild boar, ready to lower his tusks and toss this sick creature out of our home.

My heart clenched. Oh, Daddy.

"An alliance with my court could be of vast benefit. Her dowry can be anything you wish."

"I am not fool enough to bargain with your kind."

"If only your daughter had been as wise."

I stood and shouted, "I will not marry you!" As soon as the words left my lips, it felt as if the air had been knocked from my lungs. I fell to my knees and gasped for air.

My father started toward me, but he didn't go far. A tree sapling erupted through our marble floor and began to wrap around his feet and legs. It grew and twisted, and I feared it would crush him.

No! I thought desperately.

As if things weren't bad enough, they became even worse.

My younger sister appeared at the top of the staircase, and she stared down at us with wide eyes. "Georgia!" she cried.

I'd known Maggie her entire life. I knew her even better than I knew myself. If I didn't stop her, she would charge down the steps and try to take on this fae with naught but a dessert fork.

I had no choice. I would do anything not to lose another sister. I couldn't go through that again. So, I rasped out, "I will go with you."

Just like that, a swirl of dark storm clouds encircled us. His eyes bored into mine, and I tried to return his intensity. Gone was my mysterious savior by the pond with soft caresses and seductive glances. In his place stood a monster with great and terrible power. My heart skipped a beat but this time out of fear.

The fae were destruction.

He would ruin me.

After a long moment, he echoed my words in a low voice, "You will go?"

Through the swirling entropy, I could no longer see my father or sister. I prayed they were okay. If this was my fate, I wanted to do one last thing for my family. I took a deep breath and straightened my back, trying to steel my nerves. "I have terms."

He laughed, but no mirth reached his cold eyes. I couldn't believe I had ever thought them bright. "You have no bargaining power here, princess."

I ignored his mocking tone and lifted my chin. "Then make it a wedding gift."

From his towering height, he smirked down at me. "Anything for my bride." The words were threatening and seductive in equal measure.

"Promise that Maggie and father will remain untouched by your kind. Promise they will remain safe."

"Not even I can control the unseelie fae, but those within my power shall not lay a finger upon them. You have my word."

"And none of the unseelie at your behest," I added suspiciously.

He grinned. "Perhaps you shall survive my court after all. You're not a complete idiot. Very well. Any other terms?"

Slowly, I shook my head.

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He snapped his fingers, and the storm clouds dissipated.

Across the room, my father's head lulled to one side, and his eyes were still closed. He appeared to be sleeping. My sister was desperately trying to remove the tree limbs encircling his chest.

"What have you done? Release him," I growled.

"He is unharmed, and I will release him as soon as we depart. You have my word," he said.

I nodded, tears stinging the corners of my eyes. For all of their faults, the fae could not lie. So, I knew he would be forced to honor his pledge. The sooner I left, the sooner my father would be freed.

Before I could take more than a step forward, Maggie ran and fell to the floor at my feet, wrapping her arms around my middle. Just as she had when we were little. Her hot tears soaked through the fabric of my bodice. "Don't go," she wailed.

With a calm I didn't feel, I stroked her hair. "It's okay, Maggie. Everything is going to be okay," I lied. "We always knew I would marry for an alliance."

"Not like this," she whispered.

No, not like this, I thought.

I wanted to hold her and cry, too, but our father needed me. What if the sapling with

its strong encircling limbs was cutting off his breath. I thought I could see his chest rising and falling, but I couldn't be sure. Tentatively, I loosened her fingers from my waist. "I must go."

My fae captor turned on his heel and strode toward the door. He turned his head to glance in my direction. "Come, bride," he called as if I was a favored hunting hound.

I fought my pride which wished me to dig my heels into the ground and refuse him.

I imagined the words falling from my mouth. "I should rather die."

Then I pictured it—my father engulfed by the sapling and my younger sister swept through the doors in my place.

Cold, hard resolve filled me. I straightened my back. I would leave with my dignity. I would leave as a princess, not a blubbering mess. "Release my father, so I can safely go to my room and pack my dresses."

"You have no need for dresses," he said.

My eyes widened. What sort of insinuation was he making? Were the fae so wild that their brides ran about half naked?

As if reading my thoughts, a slight smile crept up his face. "You will have an all new wardrobe as any married woman should. The dresses will be made of the finest fabrics, and pearls will drip from your neck and ears."

I didn't want his finery, but I was relieved to hear they were not as savage as I feared.

"The sooner we leave, the sooner your father is freed," he reminded me.

I glanced over at my father once more. His eyes were closed, and I knew he probably couldn't hear me when I said softly, "Goodbye."

Blinking back tears, I turned to follow my bridegroom out of my childhood home and away to a land of monsters.

My sister launched herself at the fae, but thorny vines crept up her legs and held her unharmed but in place.

"Goodbye, Maggie," I said.

As the heavy doors closed behind us, I felt as if my heart would cleave in two.

We walked in silence for some time. I was worried about Maggie. Would she be okay without me? She had lost so much already—her mother, her eldest sister, and now me.

When I was four, I lost my mother to a terrible fever. When I was fifteen, I lost my elder sister to the fae. It had been hard, breathtakingly so.

But Maggie had it worse. She hadn't even been two years old when mother died. She had still been sleeping in a crib in the nursery. Once, I heard the servants whisper that "it was best she wouldn't remember." But Maggie knew what she had lost.

Every night of that awful first month, Maggie had snuck out of her crib and crawled into bed with me. I'm sure the nursemaid knew where Maggie went, but who would have the heart to separate two mourning children?

Years later, Maggie had lost Briar.



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Today, she was losing me.

Now, Maggie stood truly alone—the last princess, the eldest sister, and the sole remaining heiress to our kingdom. I knew she wasn't that small, crying toddler anymore. She hadn't been for a long time. She was a fun, quick-witted, and confident young woman.

But I was still worried. A kingdom was a heavy burden to bear.

When we exited the palace gates, no one stopped us. It had been my last hope.

Outside, I looked around with wide eyes. It had been a long time since I had ventured so far outside the palace gates. When I was a child, when my younger sister was still in the nursery, my older sister Briar and I would run past the gate, clasping hands and giggling. We would play in the sandy soil or collect moss to make nests for swamp birds.

That all changed after she was taken. The gates closed. My father's guards and my governess were everywhere. Even at twenty years old.

"Come, little sparrow," the fae called almost affectionately. "Let's free you from your gilded cage."

I felt a growl rise in my throat. Free me from my cage? Had he no sense of self awareness? He was ripping me away from my family. I had never hated someone so much in my life. I opened my mouth to say so but stopped short. It was unwise to anger the fae. They neither understood nor cared about human emotions.

I knew where we were going. The fae lived on a terrible island, shrouded in mist, and hidden not far off our shores. Any ship that sailed too close would be dragged to the bottom of the ocean. No one visited them there. Only the unwise visited them in our marketplace. If you were even more unwise, you could strike a bargain. Like me.

I was the biggest fool of them all.

The sun had fallen behind the ocean now. In the shadows of the large oak trees, glass bottles rattled. As we neared it, one of them began to swing wildly.

With studied indifference, the fae untied the string, releasing the bottle and letting it smash against the ground. The bottle broke, and a sprite flew out.

"Nasty human," it buzzed in my ear.

I swatted at it, and it flew away.

Now that we were out on the open road, the fae man shook off his glamor like an old cloak. His black hair was longer, his ears formed sharp points, and there were shells woven into his hair. Most amazing of all, iridescent, blue-green wings erupted from his back. His shirt was unbuttoned, and leather belts hung low on his hips.

He was as wild, beautiful, and fierce as the sea he longed to drag me across.

Though we were miles away, I could feel the ocean air stir my hair. He grinned.

I loathed him, and yet... a rare opportunity had arisen. Free entrance to the fae realm. This chance would not come again. I might find my stolen sister.

Maybe something good would come of this yet.

## CHAPTER 7

### The Stolen Bride

Ordinarily, his kind walked across the water, their feet only dipping ankle deep into the playful ocean waves.

I could not walk across the waters. I could not even swim as far as his island.

My presence forced him to do something unexpected. He knelt on the dock and plunged his head under the water.

A brief moment of madness overcame me. Perhaps, I could hold his head under the water, drown him, and escape. Absolute nonsense, of course. It would have been like killing a bird by forcing it to fly. It would have only angered him.

He emerged and whipped his wet hair back, slinging water against my face.

I glowered at him, wiping it away with my hand.

On the evening horizon, I could just make out a small pod of seals. They were traveling toward us, and their gray, slick skin gleamed in the moonlight. Behind them, they pulled an open-top carriage adorned with gold and pearls. It floated across the top of the waves.

The pod moved closer and closer until, at last, they reached the dock. The lustrous carriage knocked gently against the side of the wood. The fae nodded at the seals and stepped inside. Then he looked back at me expectantly. He did not offer his hand.

In for an oyster, in for a pearl, I thought, stepping carefully into the carriage. I gazed at the seals. They were so beautiful. I longed to stroke their slick coats. One turned

and pressed her wet nose into my hand. I laughed in delight.

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The Fae King gave me an indulgent smile. "Go on. Give her a pat if you like. Selkies are peaceful, affectionate, and incredibly loyal."

I quickly withdrew my hand. Selkies were not ordinary seals. They were fae who could transform, and I had never heard them described so favorably.

He scowled at me, then turned his attention to the selkies. "Would you mind carrying us to the nearest entrance? My companion can't walk on water."

With no further warning, the carriage took off, and I was pulled back against my bench seat. Soon, we were gliding across the waves at a steady clip. The selkies moved gracefully in and out of the waves.

The carriage stopped as abruptly as it had started, and the selkies vanished beneath the waves. There was only one problem. We had not reached the island. We were floating in the middle of the ocean. What in the twelve kingdoms was going on?

He turned to me and answered my unvoiced question. "We must swim the rest of the way."

I looked at the dark green ocean water below, glistening in the moonlight. Hesitancy rose in my gut. The currents near the isle were rumored to be fierce and often deadly. Was this one of their games? Did he wish to drown me?

He studied me before adding, "It is the only way that your kind may pass into our realm."

Of course, it wouldn't be easy. I stood and shifted toward the carriage door.

This time, he stood and held out a hand, eyeing my heavy gown and laces. "Surely you don't intend to dive into the water in that? You'll drown."

Perhaps, he wished me to live, after all. Or perhaps—a dark thought flitted through my mind—he wished me to die in my underthings for his even greater amusement. Fae humor was often dark and malignant. They enjoyed tricks and disorder. They didn't see value in human life. Perhaps because it was so much shorter than their own.

Still, his point was undeniable. I would certainly drown in my heavy garments. I frowned and began to work the laces. I struggled halfway down. Generally, my lady's maid assisted me in and out of fine garments.

"Allow me," he offered.

What other choice did I have? I could not stay in this tiny boat. I could not swim in the garment. I narrowed my eyes, still unsure if this was a cruel game, but nodded.

He undid the laces skillfully—a little too skillfully, really—then tugged the gown from my body. Our eyes met for a brief moment, and I shivered in the warm breeze. This was nearly exactly how we had met.

Though the evening was hot, the ocean water was cool. It might have been refreshing if I weren't so afraid. We swam leisurely for several minutes. I'm not a poor swimmer, but I could tell he was slowing his pace to match mine. I began to relax. Maybe this would be okay. Maybe it wasn't a trick.

After several more minutes, I looked up at the shoreline. To my utter dismay, it was no closer. Perhaps this was a trick after all. Perhaps the isle wasn't even really there. Maybe it was a mirage, like when foolish sailors ran low on provisions and drank sea

water believing it to be ale.

Abruptly, he stopped swimming.

"What?" I asked, treading water.

"We're here," he said.

I looked around. All I saw was miles of ocean in every direction. "Where?"

"We must swim down. Below us, there is a large stone archway. Once we pass through it, we'll resurface. Only then will we see the island."

I looked around feeling anxious. "There's no other way? You're certain?"

"You could swim forever and never get any closer."

My heart clenched. I had often heard the stories of foolish men and women, trying to find their way to the island. No one ever made it... unless they wanted you to.

The question was... did he want me to?

I saw little other choice. I could not make it back to my shore from this great distance. I also couldn't swim to the isle if that was not his will. I could float on my back here until I sunk beneath the waves, or I could follow him willingly.

I nodded.

He dove beneath the waves, and I followed, blinking back murky water. He led me down, down, down. Further than I believed I could go. My lungs screamed for air. My legs grew tired.

Then water sprites appeared in swirling shadows. They had algae green hair, barnacled little bodies, and black, malicious eyes. They pulled at my hair and scratched my legs, tugging me downward. I kicked out at them. I tried to dig my fingernails into their slimy flesh, but I couldn't stay down any longer. I needed to breathe.



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I no longer knew which way was up and which was down. Palpable fear shot through my body as I realized I was going to drown.

Then strong arms wrapped around my waist, and tugged me upward. With a kick from him, the sprites returned to the shadows below.

My fae captor was... saving me.

### CHAPTER 8

#### The Stolen Bride

We broke through the surface of the water, and I gasped for air. I couldn't believe it. Somehow, I was still alive.

Ahead, under the light of the full moon, I saw their island. It was close now. I tried to swim toward it, but my muscles started to cramp. I might have fallen back below the waves if it weren't for him.

Beside me, as he was catching his breath, he said, "Stop trying to swim. You'll drown. Just float on your back."

Of course. I knew that. It was the first swimming lesson my sisters and I had ever gotten. Surrounded by ponds, rivers, ocean, and marsh, all three of us had learned to float as toddlers. Still, I was amazed at how easy it was to lose my head when my brain was foggy, and my muscles were tired. This was how people drowned.

I rested on my back, breathing hard, and staring up at the moonlight. Thanking the stars that I was alive to see their light.

Soon, we were surrounded by the pod of selkies once more.

"May we help?" one asked.

I was too tired to argue, so I just nodded.

A selkie pulled me onto her slick back, and I clung to her for dear life. Slowly, we glided across the waves. To my surprise, the island was visible just ahead. I had never seen it without its shroud of mist.

A few minutes later, the water became too shallow for the selkies. They began to shed their seal skins and transformed into beautiful, bare-breasted women. Their long hair drifted behind them as they waded through the waist-deep water.

My selkie was the last to transform, and when she did, I slid from her back and plunged back into the water. Two selkies grabbed my arms and helped me toward the shore. I turned my head and saw the fae man was close behind, walking along the top of the water with ease.

He grinned down at me. "How's the water?"

Despite the heat of the night air, the water here held a chill like a mountain stream. Absent-mindedly, I ran my hands up and down my arms, trying to keep warm.

"You're cold," cried the selkie on my left arm. "How terrible. Won't you take one of our seal skins? They're awfully warm."

The one of my right arm nodded emphatically. "Oh, yes. I'd gladly let you have my

seal skin. We can mate with humans, you know."

I already knew that accepting (or stealing) a selkie's skin was to bind myself to them for life. The last thing I needed was a second betrothed, so I shook my head as politely as I could manage. "I'm afraid I'm already spoken for," I said.

My fae captor snorted.

I hadn't realized his hearing was quite so good. I frowned up at him. As if this entire situation weren't his doing. Still, I supposed he hadn't left me to drown. That was something.

Luckily, the selkies seemed unperturbed by my rejection. They continued to support me through the choppy waves. Instead, they moved on to my bridegroom with a giggle. "What about you, King? Surely you deserve many women."

He winked at her. "A tempting offering, but I think just the one bride will do."

Well, that was something at least. I wasn't joining a harem of stolen brides.

With that, the two selkies dropped my arms and sunk back into the water. I stumbled, nearly face planting into the waves.

The fae man sank into the water a few feet and took purchase of my arm himself. "Sulky selkies," he muttered.

Not long after, we stepped onto the sandy beach of the isle, and he released my arm. My shift clung to my figure, and I was sure it was nearly transparent. I folded my arms across my chest. My wet hair fell loose down my back. I felt cold, frightened, and exposed.

But I had actually made it! I was on the island and somewhere my sister, Briar, was too. If I was lucky, I might be able to make my family whole once more.

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We walked silently for several minutes before I noticed spectators—first, dancing orbs and fairy lights, then movement among the sea oats, and finally, crowds of seelie court fae like we saw in the marketplace. They were tall with pointed ears and beautiful, so beautiful. Their lives were tenfold our own. Why were they all here? Why were they watching us?

"What are you, some kind of prince?" I grumbled.

He looked down at me and grinned. "Darling, I'm a king."

I swallowed back my astonishment. His kind couldn't lie, or so the stories said. In fact, hadn't a selkie just called him king, too? I had assumed it was a nickname. But no, apparently, it was actually true.

My captor wasn't just any fae—he was their king! A thrill of fear shot up my spine. This was so much worse than I had realized. Even while I was catastrophizing, a small part of my brain thought, Well, Father, you got your wish. I'm marrying royalty! Unwittingly, a laugh escaped my lips.

He looked down at me with a furrowed brow. "Is something amusing?"

"Nothing at all," I said quickly.

"What forked tongues you mortals possess to lie with such ease," he said, not bothering to hide his disgust.

"Your kind deceive with equal measure, my king," I spat back with venom. "Let us

not forget, if you had not concealed your identity and obfuscated your words, I wouldn't be here at all!"

For a moment, he said nothing, and neither did I. We walked in icy silence as I hoped not to collapse. My muscles were shaking from fatigue. I had fought the water sprites with everything I had, trying to escape the cold, murky depths of the ocean and a watery grave.

Finally, he looked down at me and cocked an eyebrow as if daring me to reply. "Any other faults you wish to lay at my door?"

I don't know what came over me, but I grinned sweetly up at him. "Do fae kings often neglect to provide their betrothed with an engagement ring, or does your kind marry so often you can't be bothered?" Apparently, nearly drowning had made me reckless. I never spoke so freely at home, and I had been cautioned since childhood not to anger the fae.

But he wasn't angry. He tilted back his head and started laughing. "A ring? Really? You mortals are so traditional. Still, let no one say I am an inattentive husband." He raised one hand into the air, and the sky darkened above us.

An ominous feeling fluttered in my stomach, and the little hairs on my arms stood straight up. I immediately regretted antagonizing him.

He jerked his hand downward, and lightning struck the sand just feet ahead of us.

I gasped and stumbled backward. My hand on my chest, I asked, "What are you doing? Are you trying to kill us?"

He chuckled. "My lightning won't hurt you, and it certainly won't hurt me."

He stepped forward, knelt on the ground, and scooped up a smoldering lump of sand. He blew on it, and the charred sand drifted away, revealing the most beautiful piece of sea glass I had ever beheld.

"There," he said, polishing it on the hem of his tunic. "I'll have the smiths set it. You can choose whatever precious metal you desire. Add gems, pearls, shells, anything you wish."

He opened my hand, dropped the smooth glass in my palm, and wrapped his hand around mine. For a moment, he was quiet—devoid of his chuckles and bravado. He studied me, slowly and carefully.

I shivered.

"You're cold," he realized.

I was, but it wasn't the reason I had shivered.

My eyes darted once more to our spectators, lining the sand dunes. The beach had narrowed, and they were even closer now.

In an effort to regain some sense of control, I said, "I don't suppose you have a cloak, your majesty?" I dripped as much condescension as possible into the last word. Anything to belie my true fear.

Of course, he noticed my eyes had drifted to the crowd. He made a small sound in the back of his throat, a kind of hmm.

Then, he swept me off the ground and into his arms. I let out a loud squeak of surprise but discovered I was instantly warmer. It was as if I were sitting by a fireside. A fae glamour, perhaps? In his warm, muscular arms, pressed against his

hard chest with nothing but wet fabric to separate us, my reckless heart skipped a beat.

Together, we were the portrait of romantic bliss. He was the dashing bridegroom sweeping his bride across the threshold of our new home. There was only one little problem... Even if he had saved me from drowning, presented me with the most beautiful sea glass I had ever seen, and warmed me with his nice, toasty glamour, I still didn't want to marry him. I hated the fae that had plagued my kingdom with storms and stolen my sister, and I hated him most of all. He had taken me from my family and my duty.

I glared up at him.

He grinned down at me, unfazed by the red hot coal of my hatred. Perhaps even enjoying it. Somehow, the effect reminded me of a mischievous, little boy. It made his stupid ears even pointier.



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He whispered, far too close to my soft, rounded ear, "Best to play the part, or you'll raise their ire. After all, who wouldn't want to marry the king?"

"I thought you said no harm would come to me," I hissed back.

"Whilst I am with you," he reminded, nipping at my earlobe.

I shivered. Whether from his words or his warm breath, I wasn't sure.

### CHAPTER 9

#### The Fae King

I studied her, clutching the sea glass in her hand. Her inviting eyes, the color of the sea, tilted up toward me in awe. Her coral lips were parted ever so slightly, and I had the strangest urge to press my lips to hers.

Did her mother's magic run in her veins? Was I ensorcelled?

Certainly not. Don't forget your part, I thought sharply. Win her heart. Win your freedom.

She shivered, and I was caught off guard once more. "You're cold," I said in surprise. How could she be cold? It was a warm evening, and she had her wretched magic to warm her. Didn't she?

"I don't suppose you have a cloak, your majesty." Her tone was meant to be biting,

but shivering from cold and fear, she hadn't managed it.

I never expected a witchling to be so delicate. Was it a trick? Mortals were masters at deception. I knew better than to underestimate her.

But no. Her dress was clinging to her curves, and her golden hair toppled down her back. Her cheeks were pale.

How utterly fragile all mortals truly were.

She would collapse before we even made it to the castle. I sighed inwardly and scooped her into my arms.

She let out a tiny gasp of surprise, and I must admit I rather enjoyed it. Other than her little outburst moments ago, she had been reserved since I went to collect her. Shy. Anxious. Diminished. Nothing like the girl I had met by the pond that night—the one running barefoot through the woods, drinking champagne straight from the bottle, and diving into the pond in her undergarments. It was a shame. I rather liked that girl.

I conjured a warming glamour and allowed it to spread down my arms and envelope us both. Her teeth stopped chattering.

It made me feel something.

Pride? Happiness? I wasn't sure, but I didn't like it. Not one bit.

## CHAPTER 10

### The Stolen Bride

Wrapped in his arms, he carried me inland, away from the ocean shore and the

crowds who had gathered to see their king arrive with his new bride. They were probably wondering the same thing I was—why was I here? Why did he choose me?

Somewhere at our feet, I heard a faint whisper. "Welcome."

I looked down and spotted an enormous sea turtle, half buried in the sand and hidden among the tall oat grass. I started to incline my head in thanks, but then I noticed the blood dripping from its lips. I quickly averted my eyes.

My groom carried me onward until the sand turned to soil. Soon, ancient oak trees canopied above us, arching into a pathway. They were like ours at home but larger and more gnarled. How many thousands of years had these trees seen? How deep were their roots?

The trees were aglow with mesmerizing orbs of light. They weren't the lightning bugs I was used to. I felt I shouldn't look at them, but I also couldn't seem to stop. For once, I was grateful to be carried. I didn't trust my own feet.

Ahead, a magnificent castle loomed on the horizon. It appeared as if it had been wrought from the very elements themselves—sand, shell, and ocean spray. The effect was breathtaking and otherworldly. It was nothing like our homes, even my own palatial one.

"What do you think?" he asked.

I tried not to let my wonder show. I shrugged and said, "It looks like a dribbled sand castle. A naughty child might kick it over."

He gave me a sliver of a smile that didn't meet his eyes. "It will take more than a mortal child to fell this palace."

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I was taken aback by the warning in his tone.

He bridal carried me down a long, empty hallway until we finally reached a colossal set of doors. Through my thin, wet garment, his strong arms seared his natural body heat into my skin and warmed my chilled bones.

As he turned the door knob, my heart beat faster. I knew what I had promised him. I was a stolen bride. Did this count as our wedding night? Did the fae even hold formal ceremonies?

For just a moment, I dared to look up into his eyes.

He gazed back, and my breath hitched.

I imagined what was going to happen next. He would wrap his arms around me, unencumbered by watchful eyes, and drag me to his bedroom. There, my wet shift would hit the floor followed by his handsome cloak. I would run my hands along his strong muscular biceps and chest. He would bring his delicious, sinful mouth to my bare shoulder and languidly work his way up to my neck.

My overactive imagination came to a screeching halt as I was roughly deposited on the floor. I was so surprised I slipped in a puddle made from the water of my own dripping, wet shift.

Of course, he didn't apologize.

I looked up at him in annoyance and found his appearance had changed. His brilliant

facade was fading—his skin had turned a sickly, pale green, and his limbs drooped with exhaustion.

He didn't even bother to look at me as he muttered, "Take whichever room you like."

Without another word, he entered a nearby doorway and flopped down on a majestic king sized bed. Then, with a wave of his hand, the door magically closed behind him.

I should have been relieved, part of me certainly was, but there was another part that was astounded. How dare he drag me through mortal peril, then just slam the door in my face? Was he so tired from the journey? Was this the true man behind the powerful exterior?

With him gone, I could begin searching for my sister immediately. I started a few paces toward the doors but stopped. My legs were shaking like a newborn calf and without his glamour, I was cold. I was also nearly naked and wearing a soaking wet garment.

No, I wasn't ready to search the castle. Not in this state.

Tomorrow, I promised.

## CHAPTER 11

### The Fae King

I closed the door between my "bride" and I.

Away from prying eyes, I collapsed into my luscious silk sheets and sighed. I had forgotten how hard it was to really try. For so long, I had believed the curse was unbreakable. I had resigned myself to a half-life filled with near constant deceit. Then

with my crown and isle at stake, I had been forced to make a move.

Would it prove miraculous or disastrous? That was yet to be determined.

Still, I was drained—emotionally, physically, and magically. I had traveled to the human realm, glamoured my fae characteristics, bound our bargain, ensnared her family, and called down lightning. Just thinking of it made me exhausted.

Not to mention I had saved her from drowning and carried her halfway here. Though, I wasn't sure I had saved her. Part of me believed she had faked the entire thing. She couldn't possibly be so fragile.

After all, my bride wasn't just any mortal. She was the daughter of my enemy—the witch who had turned me into a frog. With such powerful magic coursing through her veins, surely she could hold her breath and swim through some cold water.

But she had looked so helpless under the waves, kicking at the water sprites. Her eyes had been round with fear. Even still, I couldn't help but think somehow she was playing me.

Before I could rest my head against my pillow, my whole body began to shake. My exhaustion was triggering the curse. I gave in, and the change came swiftly. Soon, I was a bullfrog once more. I released what would have been a swear but came out as a "ribbit."

My emotions, so long deadened, had awakened this weekend. I had felt short bursts of joy, still outweighed by sorrow and self loathing. I had hoped our betrothal might free me from my curse, but that hadn't come to pass. Then, I thought perhaps her arrival on my ancestral soil might do the trick. No such luck.

Unfortunately, it seemed the witch's curse required more.

What had been her exact words? I ran quickly through my memories of that day. It felt as if they had been carved into my gray matter. "You can break your curse, but I doubt someone like you ever will."

Not exactly helpful. The other witches I had consulted suggested I marry within the witch's bloodline. One even had the gall to suggest a love match would be best.

A love match? With a human? Absurd.

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No matter how pretty her ocean eyes, I would not be bound to a woman with the lifespan of a goldfish (and likely the intellect to match). I could never love a human. But I could make her fall in love with me, and I suspected that would be enough to satisfy the magic.

Still, hours later, I lay awake wondering. How would I live with her just paces away? How would I keep up this facade? Who could possibly want what lied beneath?

## CHAPTER 12

### The Stolen Bride

I woke in moonlight with aching muscles and a throbbing headache. Perhaps, I was coming down with something. I turned my head to the cool side of the pillow and felt something hard press into my cheek. I raised my head and discovered the offending object, the pearls embroidered into my duvet.

Wait. I didn't have pearls on my duvet. I blinked and took in my surroundings. Where was I? Even in the dim lighting, I knew this was not my bedroom. In the corner, soft lavender blossoms erupted from a shimmering sea glass floor and emitted an intoxicating scent. The posts of my bed were made of golden, twisting vine, curving upward to form a canopy of the smallest, brightest green leaves.

Then it all came back to me. I was in the fae realm. I was a stolen bride. My stomach dropped like an anchor, and panic rose in my chest.

What was I doing sleeping? I had to get out of here. Now.



My frantic gaze landed on a large set of windows. A warm ocean breeze drifted in and out like the tides. What would stop intruders from entering or stolen brides from exiting? I stepped closer and looked downward. The ground was many stories below.

I assumed there were wards I couldn't see with my weak human eyes. But... perhaps there were not. After all, who would care if a mere mortal tumbled to her death on the rocks? Certainly not my groom who had dumped me at the entrance.

If he cared so little about my presence, perhaps I could simply exit through the main doors. I hurried to my bedroom door and turned the knob. Outside, the halls, the rooms, and even the entry appeared to be deserted. The sound of my footfalls echoed, making me feel like an ogre patrolling a stolen castle.

I was suddenly suspicious. Why were there so few staff attending the king? Was this common for fae, or did he prefer to remain isolated and undisturbed? Perhaps he traveled frequently? Perhaps he had given them a holiday?

I shook my head. I didn't care about him or his staff. I had found the exit. There was no one to stop me from running out the large oak doors.

This was my chance for escape.

I wondered, brazenly, if I had time to find my stolen sister, too. How many hours did I have until daybreak?

I stormed toward the door, placed my hand upon the latch, and was ready to throw the doors open. Then, my heart began to hammer against my rib cage. I couldn't catch my breath. I was running out of air. It felt as if I had been running for miles.

I feared I would vomit.

I feared I would die.

What was happening?

Then I realized this had happened before in my very own dining room. The bargain would not allow me to walk away so easily. It would rather kill me.

I will not break our bargain, I thought desperately. At once, everything eased. I leaned over with my hands on my knees, taking sharp, ragged breaths.

I will not break our bargain.

I will not break our bargain.

I turned the words over and over in my mind until my breathing returned to normal.

If I did, I would die.

There was more. If I did not uphold my end of our bargain, the king would not be bound by his. Maggie and father would be in grave danger.

My internal rebellion flickered out at once. I would stay and marry him, but I vowed to never love him. As I thought it, a deep sadness washed over me. Ours would be a cruel, loveless marriage. One of tricks and deceit.

I had known I was destined for an arranged marriage, but somehow I had still hoped for something more. That hope was snuffed out like a candle.

I returned to my bedroom.

When I woke again, the sun was well along its path across the sky. An ocean breeze

blew in and gently tugged at the tendrils of my hair. I lay in a tangle of silk sheets, covered by a crumpled duvet.

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As I looked up at the twisting vines that were the posts of my bed, my eyes filled with tears. I thought of my father and the cruel sapling that almost took his life. No matter how beautiful, I could not allow myself to be taken in by the curiosities and charms of this new world... or my dangerous host.

"Ah, mistress is up," a high-pitched voice greeted me.

I looked around but saw no one. Was the lady invisible, or was there another frog hopping around, making cruel bargains?

There was a tug at the corner of my sheets. I glanced down and saw a small brown rabbit with a pink twitching nose. "I am called Rosie, mistress. I am to be your lady's maid."

Stars above, a talking rabbit. Would these mad wonders never cease? The last thing I wanted was another fae oddity nearby, especially one so absurdly cute. She reminded me of the swamp rabbits I had kept as a little girl.

Perhaps, that was the reason for her form. If I befriended the creature, she would report on me to the king. I should turn her away. I didn't need a spy in my chambers, even one with such an adorable nose. So, in my most regal, clipped tone, I said, "I have not asked for a lady's maid."

She bowed. "One does not have to ask when one is to be queen. I am here to serve. I am half human, so I may be familiar with some of your customs."

I could hardly believe the King of the Isle had sent a half-fae to ensure my comfort.

The same man who unceremoniously dumped me in the entry last night and bound me to him by pains of death. He must have an ulterior motive.

"Can you lie?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"Only with scorching pain," Rosie replied, her whiskers twitching frantically.

"Good," I said coldly. "I don't like liars or bargainers." I may as well have told her I didn't like fae. Even without the ability to lie, they were all natural born deceivers.

She said nothing in reply. Instead, standing on her hind legs, she placed a small tray on the edge of my bed. "Drink this. You'll feel better."

"What makes you think I'm unwell?" I asked, frowning down at her.

"You said so, mistress. You talk in your sleep."

Drat. That could be a real problem.

I eyed the steaming teacup warily. I had been warned never to drink or eat anything from the fae realm. But with each beat of my heart, my head throbbed in time. I was already in the fae realm. I was betrothed to a fae. A little tea could hardly make things any worse.

I tentatively took a sip. I didn't feel the acrid sting of poison; instead, I tasted peach, sweet and tangy. I let out a small sigh of relief.

As I sipped my tea in bed, Rosie drew vines away from my windows as if opening curtains. More sunlight streamed in, and she took a good look at me. Or at least that's what it seemed like she was doing. She was a bunny, after all. I wasn't exactly skilled at reading her expressions.

She hopped onto the bed next to me, stood on her hind legs and sniffed the air.

Suddenly, I felt horribly self-conscious. How long had it been since my last bath or change of clothes? I probably looked like a drowned rat and smelled like one, too.

She pointed me toward a bathroom nearby.

When I returned, I found a gown and underthings laid out for me. However, my lady's maid was nowhere to be seen. How did she expect me to get in the garment on my own?

I moved forward to inspect it, and it became clear. This gown was in the style of the fae—scantily few undergarments and no corset laces whatsoever. My dirty clothes had vanished. So, I had no other choice. I pulled on the loose-fitted stay and then the gown itself.

I winced as I looked myself over in the mirror. The gown was a soft sea-foam green linen that nearly matched my ocean eyes. Rows upon rows of tiny pearls had been woven into the bodice and threads of what I believed might be real gold. It was a work of art, but none of that made me feel less exposed. The hemline ended mid-calf, and the neckline showed the tops of my breasts. There was very little shaping or volume, so the natural curves of my body were amply displayed. At home, this dress would have been considered lewd. Here, I suspected it was modest.

Moments later, Rosie returned. "You've missed breakfast, but if it is convenient, mistress, lunch is being served."

I nodded and allowed her to lead me to the dining room. The table was laden with food served in large shells. Instead of candlesticks and linens, the table was adorned with the treasures of the sea—coral, glittering algae, and pearls.

The strangest part, however, was that only one person sat at the table, and it was not the king. I turned to ask Rosie the meaning of this, but she had already gone.

So, I turned to the man instead. All of my defenses were up. "Who are you?" I asked through gritted teeth. "Where is the king?"

"Oh," he said, taking notice of me and giving me a sincere smile. He quickly stood and bowed. "You can call me Harry. I'm the king's right hand man."

He was a handsome young man with silvery blue eyes and warm brown hair that curled a bit at the ends. Every part of him was neatly polished. He was the portrait of civility. Even my own father would have hired him.

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If it weren't for the slight point of his ears.

Still, I had a suspicion he was not wholly fae. His ears were too curved, and his height was closer to average. But there was something more. Something intangible. Like the way you can read kindness on a face. Something primal.

He returned to his seat and began to heartily dig into his lunch.

"And the king?" I asked again. "Where is he?" I wondered briefly if he was hiding somewhere in his frog form. It must be nice to be able to shift at will.

"He rarely attends breakfast or lunch," Harry replied over a bite of toast.

"A night owl then?" I asked.

"You could say that," he replied in their cryptic way.

"You would think he could manage an appearance after dragging a woman through mortal peril," I grumbled.

He gave a short, sudden laugh and covered his mouth just in time to prevent him from spewing half-chewed toast in her face. "Quite."

A few moments of silence passed between us.

Finally, I asked tentatively, "Are there other humans here?"



"Other humans?" Harry echoed, cocking his head to the side in confusion.

I knew I was pressing my luck. Anything I said could get back the Fae King, and if he knew I was seeking my sister, he would likely be suspicious. "You know," I said with a shrug. "Other stolen brides perhaps?"

"Hmm," he said, regarding me carefully. "There are very few humans and even fewer that you would wish to meet."

I nodded, and silence lapsed once more between us. I took the opportunity to pick at the food on my plate. To my surprise, it was quite good. In fact, once I had taken my first bite, I ate like a farmhand.

Harry cleared his plate and looked over at me. "If you have any requests, please feel free to ask. Forrest would want it that way."

"Forrest?" I asked.

"Your betrothed," he said.

I felt a hot blush creeping up my cheeks. I didn't even know the name of my own betrothed. In fact, I still didn't. The fae rarely gave out their true names.

I shook it off and asked my most pressing question. "Am I confined to my room?"

He frowned. "Of course not. You are betrothed to the king."

"I haven't exactly received a royal welcome."

He bowed his head. "My apologies."

I rolled my eyes. "It's certainly not your fault."

"You have free reign over every nook and cranny of the castle and isle itself. However, if you wish to explore during the day, I beg you to allow me to escort you. The palace halls are not always friendly. A king always has enemies."

I sensed his offer was sincere, so I tried not to roll my eyes at his sage advice. "I'm the daughter of a king, and I've been warned about the fae realm since infancy. I understand the dangers, thank you."

He bowed his head again. "I can see I've offended you."

I wondered how many of Forrest's tasks Harry fulfilled. My father would have never tasked his man servant with entertaining and escorting his newly betrothed while he slept the day away.

The marks against Forrest just kept adding up. First, he was fae. Now, he was lazy. I only hoped that would be the end of his vices.

The following day, I did not see the king at breakfast, lunch, or dinner. I did not see or hear his movements within his chambers either. I'm not ashamed to admit I held my ear to the door.

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Had he brought me here to wander around empty rooms? Had he forgotten he stole a bride?

The following evening, dinner was served on the terrace. The Fae King arrived, and he looked like hell—bags under his eyes, sickly green skin, even his ridiculous wings hung limp.

I almost felt concerned for him. Had the trip made him unwell?

His expression was almost hollow. There was more than fatigue there.

Until he caught me watching him. Then he transformed. Once again, I stared at the beautiful shell of my charming fae suitor. He swept across the room and took my hand and pressed a kiss across the top. "Good evening, my beautiful bride."

My concern vanished. I was a prisoner. Not a bride.

## CHAPTER 13

### The Fae King

I stepped onto the terrace and pulled my finest glamours tight around me—ones that made me seem taller, stronger, and virtually flawless. They were like an old, familiar cloak, worn often and well.

Georgia was seated at one end of a beautifully dressed table, and her eyes darted to me immediately. Her silken, aquamarine gown brought out her large, innocent eyes.

I moved forward and took her hand in mine, pressing it briefly to my lips. "Good evening, my beautiful bride," I purred.

To my surprise, she looked up at me and frowned.

What could she possibly see to dislike? My glammers were perfect.

Ignoring this setback, I took my seat directly across the table from her. The brownies, the fantastic little creatures, had dutifully prepared us an extravagant meal out on the terrace. The table was dressed to amaze, and will-o'-the-wisps lit up a large, overhanging tree, creating a warm, romantic ambience.

Despite the efforts of the brownies, wisps, and myself, she remained silent. I was almost certain she was angry, but why? Was it about our bargain, or was it something smaller, like the food? I breathed deeply, and the warm ocean air gave me strength. I needed this to go well. "How are you settling in?" I asked, flashing her a charming smile.

"How am I settling in?" she asked, her voice rising on each word. "Do you often steal women from their ancestral homes, nearly drown them, and then neglect them for days?" She clutched her fork as if she might brandish it as a weapon against me.

"Do you often steal women?" Was she serious? It took a lot of effort for me to come here with my glammers. My staff had prepared a beautiful meal. Now, she was accusing me of infidelity? The human woman I didn't even really want to marry. "Do you see any other women around?" I asked pointedly.

She gaped. "Excuse me?"

"Then you have your answer," I said smoothly. "Have you tried the rolls? They're very good."

Her brow furrowed as she worked through my words. Her glare didn't soften. Apparently, it would take more than a bit of food to improve our acquaintance. Humans were so fickle. Had I not already saved the wretched woman's life?

A smaller part of me whispered, Weren't you the one who endangered it?

Still, I soldiered on. I needed this woman to love me. My crown and kingdom were counting on it. Humans were often beguiled by the fae. So, I pulled more energy into my glammers, hiding my fatigue and emotions behind an impenetrable wall of perfection. "Since you are here, why not just fall hopelessly in love with me? You'll find me a most dutiful husband." I let the last part trail over my tongue languidly, suggestively.

She snorted. "Dutiful? The man who forced me to leave my family?"

"Isn't that to be expected? Don't all brides leave their families one day? From what I understand, your days were already numbered. Would you have truly preferred the icy lands of the North?"

A mix of emotions raced across her face, too rapidly concealed for me to discern. I was surprised. I never expected a human to be difficult to read. Perhaps, it was because she was a princess. Masking would be a politically advantageous skill.

Still, her anger and resentment toward me were plain enough as she said, "My prior entanglements do not concern you."

"Oh, indeed they do," I whispered. "I am interested in everything about you."

"I am interested in why you dragged me across your treacherous waters. I could have died. Even now, I remain in danger as a human in the fae realm."

"Life is dangerous, little sparrow. Have you been hidden behind closed doors and gilded gates for so long that you no longer remember how to fly?"

A small growl escaped her lips, and one of her tiny hands clenched into a fist around her cloth napkin.

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Adorable. Like an angry kitten.

I wanted to stay and argue with her. I needed to stay and woo her, but my glamours had taken their toll. My body was too exhausted to hold this form any longer. My limbs were beginning to shake, and I would be a frog at any moment.

It seemed my body still needed rest.

So, I stood and bowed. "Little sparrow, I would gladly sit and fight with you for many hours, if my time permitted, but I have matters I must attend to. Please enjoy your dinner."

As I made a hasty exit, I heard her mutter, "You have to be kidding."

So much for making her love me. This was not going well.

I lay flat on my bed, trembling and hoping to put off the change by resting. The silk sheets just didn't feel the same when I was in my frog form. But what did?

Not an hour later, there was a knock at my chamber door. "Come in," I called.

The door swung open, revealing Harry.

I turned my head to look at him but didn't bother to sit up. "I know what you want."

"Then get moving," he urged.

"Not tonight, Harry. Please."

"The council will be expecting you."

"I'd rather just lie here. I'm too tired to get up. I just, I just can't. Make excuses."

"Is that an order from my king or a request from my friend?" he asked.

I rolled over and reached for a goblet of faerie wine. I brought it messily to my lips, dripping some of its contents onto my black silk sheets. "Whichever will make you leave me alone."

He frowned. "I'll make your excuses, Forrest, but I'm worried about you and those marks around your heart. Are they darkening?"

I gave him a hollow grin. "My dear Harry, worrying without a solution is like drinking without a stomach. Pointless."

"We drink to taste, to feel, to experience. Not unlike why we live our lives, wouldn't you say?"

"Mine has been tasteless for a long time."

"Perhaps, you will find something to tempt your palette yet, my friend. At least, I very much hope so," he said softly.

I downed the rest of my goblet's contents, dropped it lazily onto the floor, and closed my eyes. I didn't open them again until I heard the soft click of the door and knew Harry was gone. Gone to make my excuses. Gone to fulfill my tasks.

He was a good friend, better than I deserved.



Soon, the will-o'-the-wisps floated in the window and danced above my head, just like they did every evening. "Ah," I cracked a slight smile. "Good evening, my little friends."

"Good king," they chorused.

"What tales do you have for me? What juicy gossip? Political machinations or debauchery? Any with both?"

The female landed on my shoulder and nuzzled me affectionately. "Why, we will tell you whatever you desire. Tales of courts near and far."

And so they did.

I lost track of time, and the first light of the sun streamed through my window. Instantly and with no warning, I turned into a large bullfrog.

I hadn't intended for anyone to see this sudden display, not now or ever. I had imbibed too much wine. I had been careless.

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But I quickly masked by laughing and calling out, "How do you like my little trick?"

The will-o'-the-wisps gasped, and a few began to clap and cheer. "How clever," called one.

"Do it again," cried another.

A will-o'-the-wisp with a bright blue glow squinted his tiny eyes in suspicion. "Why are you a frog?"

I let out a regal croak and glared at him. "I am the king of the isle, the marsh, and the beaches. Do you not think I can take any form I wish at any time?"

"Perhaps," he mumbled.

The wisp next to him elbowed him hard in the stomach. "Of course, king. A fine trick. Show us more."

A female wisp yawned. "Daylight is here. We mustn't tarry."

"Goodnight, sweet king," a chorus of wisps called out as they flew out the window and away to sleep in the hidden hollows of trees and the darkness of curled leaves.

The blue, male hung behind and circled me.

My long, frog tongue shot out and I swallowed the wisp whole. "Perhaps," the wisp had said. That was no way to speak to your king.

Two long days passed, and other than our brief dinner, I remained a bullfrog for nearly all of them. The physical and magical strain of my travel weakened me greatly. I could do nothing but rest and wait for my body to recover.

It was agonizing.

What were Hawthorne and my council up to?

I hated myself for hiding away in my chambers. I hated my body for being so weak. I hated my mind for not seeing a way out. Most of all, I hated the witch who had done this to me.

But she was dead. And her clueless daughter was in the other room. I would have gone out and demanded answers from her, but I wasn't sure I should reveal my weakness. What if she truly didn't know I couldn't control the changes from man to frog? I would be giving her leverage. And I didn't need anyone else to have leverage over me.

Finally, on the third day, I was able to hold my form as a man. Despite that, I was exhausted and depressed. I slept for what felt like ages.

Later, Harry stopped in with a dinner tray. "Oh, good. You're awake."

He set the tray down on my bed, and I quickly appraised it. There was a slice of homemade bread, butter, roasted pheasant, a side of caramelized pears, and a goblet of milk. I frowned at Harry. I was not a child, and I knew when I was being cut off. Blighted milk.

I took an annoyed bite from my bread and decided to ignore that particular argument. "How is she? The girl?" I couldn't bring myself to say bride. It was all too real.

His brows crinkled. "I didn't see her at lunch. Maybe we should check with Rosie."

I rang my bell, and a small brown rabbit hopped in.

"Where is she?" I demanded.

"Out in the forest again, I'm afraid," answered the rabbit fae.

I set my bread back on the tray, no longer hungry. "After dark?" I asked.

Her nose twitched. "I've warned her, but you gave strict instructions not to confine her."

I sighed and rose from my bed. "Very well." I grabbed my riding cloak and moved swiftly to the door. Along the way, I wondered, had I taken a wife or a ward?

## CHAPTER 14

### The Stolen Bride

I had often read stories about places that seemed oh so dark and dangerous but turned out to be candy and sunshine. The island wasn't like that.

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It was beautiful and deadly.

Today was my third day searching for my sister, and I was no nearer to finding her. I had, however, learned a lot about the island itself. If I allowed my mind to wander, my feet followed. It was as if the island was an intricate series of faerie circles. I could be in my bedroom, then out on the beach in mere steps. I could be in the entry then find myself wandering the kitchens. I wasn't very good at controlling it yet.

Each time I wandered too long or too far, Rosie or Harry came to gently but insistently collect me. This time, I was far from the shore and castle. Somewhere inland in a lush, deep forest. It had been beautiful in daylight, but now the sun had set. In the darkness, I was beginning to question my own wisdom. Why did I come alone? Shouldn't someone be along to collect me?

A blood curdling scream ripped through the night air. I froze, my heart pounding in my ears. Before I could duck or run, a large shadow soared overhead, casting a shadow that eliminated even the moon's faint light.

I gazed up and saw the silhouette of a massive owl. For one irrational moment, I believed he would lift me up and carry me away. In his tree, he would strip my bones like a field mouse.

No, I comforted myself. It's only an ordinary owl. Your imagination is playing tricks on you. But on the isle, I couldn't be entirely sure.

Now I really, really wished someone would come to collect me.

Maybe they had grown tired of it. Maybe it was petulant of me to assume they would keep coming.

How could I get back on my own? There had to be a way. I could figure this out. Let's see. If I could leave the castle by letting my mind wander, maybe I could get back by thinking of it.

I tried for a moment. It was difficult when every rustle of the wind set my teeth on edge. The castle. My room in the castle.

I heard a twig snap. Wait. What was that? Was someone following me?

My room. The castle, I insisted to my brain. Think of it.

It didn't work.

Instead, I found myself entering a field of mist. First, it pooled around my ankles. Then it rose. I tried to turn and go back where I had come from, but the mist only grew thicker. Soon, I could see no more than a foot in front of my own nose.

Another twig snapped at my side, and I froze. I had the unmistakable, eerie feeling that I was not alone anymore. Someone walked beside me in this mist. I could feel their overpowering presence.

A primal terror pulsed through me. I felt like a deer in the moment before a coyote springs. Please, I prayed. Please send Rosie or Harry to collect me. I won't stay out after dark again.

But no one came to my rescue.

Instead, I felt a nearly irresistible urge to reach out my hand as if to grasp another.

Someone was waiting for me in the mist. All I needed to do was take their hand. Unthinking, I moved my hand inch by inch until the tips of my fingers disappeared into the mist.

With a jolt of horror, I jerked my treacherous hand back. What was I doing? No! I will not, I thought desperately.

My fingers wiggled, testing my resolve. I clasped my hands tightly together and increased my walking pace. I knew better than to speak. If I was correct, if I wasn't alone, this mist might be my only friend. If I couldn't see them, perhaps they couldn't see me.

Somehow, I might yet escape this powerful pull.

Seconds passed like minutes. Minutes like hours. But eventually, the fog did begin to thin ever so slightly. Just ahead, I could make out the faint silhouette of low tree branches. Little lights danced within them—yellow, orange, pink, and red, blinking in and out.

I moved closer, wanting nothing more than to leave this shadow and mist behind. As I grew closer, I could see the lights were actually will-o'-the-wisps—tiny, flying fairies with sharp faces and ears. Each was smaller than my thumb and glowed like a bright orb.

"Hello," one greeted me, its smile exposing its razor canines.

"Hello," I returned tentatively. "Is someone else out here?"

They shook their heads. "Just us. Where are you headed?"

"The castle," I said more assuredly than I felt.

"Oh, no!" they chorused sadly. "You are going the wrong way."

Another chimed in, "Follow us. We'll lead you home."

I didn't believe them. But what other choice did I have? I couldn't stay here. Something waited in the mist.



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"Okay," I whispered.

"Follow us." I swore I heard a faint laugh, like a faraway bell. The mist still surrounded us, and I hurried to keep up with them. Anything not to be alone.

After a few minutes, I smelled the putrid stench of sulfur in the air, and my boots began to squelch in the familiar, thick mud of the salt marshes.

Soon, the wisps were flying faster and faster. Their lights were fading in the thick mist. I quickened my pace to keep up, but one of my boots squelched deep into the mud and stuck. My foot flew free.

I groaned and leaned down to search for my missing shoe. The smell of decomposition was nearly overpowering at such a close distance.

I glanced up, and the lights were nearly gone. "No! Wait!" I cried, standing up and forgetting about my boot entirely. I ran forward, my bare foot sinking in the soft mud.

But the dancing lights did not wait for me. Their laughter rang out as they disappeared into the mist, leaving me alone in darkness. Star blighted little buggers. I should have known better than to follow them. Now, I was worse off than when they found me.

Resigned, I continued forward.

As quickly as it had come, the mist began to dissipate.

Ahead, I saw the faint silhouette of a woman with sharp horns. She alone was shrouded from head to toe in mist, and I could only make out her general shape. I suspected at once that she was the fae who had walked beside me in the mist.

Everything had been a game.

I was being hunted.

None of the fae were safe, but this woman was more terrifying than any other I had encountered. Even now, my own body was trying to betray me. I felt a strong urge to run toward her and throw myself at her feet. I wanted to... serve her?

An icy chill ran down my spine. With great strength of will, I forced myself to change direction and slogged deeper and deeper into the marsh.

Yet, somehow, the woman grew closer. I couldn't see more than her silhouette in the darkness, but I felt her presence. She was large, ancient, and beautiful. Ethereal even... or, perhaps, the exact opposite.

My blood ran cold. My pulse dropped. I was too scared to move.

Somehow, she was closer. Between her two sharp horns, she wore a crown made of bones. Despite her proximity, I still couldn't see her face. She was shrouded in wisps of fabric, like a skeletal bride, mocking me, a stolen bride. She reached out a hand, and I moved my own to grasp hers.

Just as my fingers were a mere whisper away from hers, someone wrapped strong arms around my waist and jerked me away. For a moment, I was airborne. I landed on the back of a large stag with a majestic rack of antlers. His hide gleamed like stardust in the darkness.

A hand wrapped around my mouth, silencing my scream.

I felt warm breath against my ear. "Say nothing," whispered the Fae King.

I could still feel the lingering presence of the one in front of us, watching malevolently.

The wisps reappeared and cried out, "My king."

He paid them no attention, staring into the inky darkness. "Do not test me," he called, his voice like a riptide, dangerous and unpredictable. Only a fool would have ignored him.

The shrouded fae did not move nor speak.

He glared a moment longer, then called out to his steed, "Yah!"

With my back pressed into his hard, warm chest, I felt safe. Who would dare touch me while I was with him? This feeling was primal, overpowering...

The stag turned, and together we squelched through the marsh. The wisps hovered around us, murmuring apologies in their high pitched voices.

He swatted them like gnats.

With his powerful arms wrapped around me, I nodded off against his warm chest as we journeyed back through the dark forest. The stag's movements were graceful and steady.

When we returned, he helped me off the stag and then looked carefully down the long bridge of his nose at me. "Georgia," he said carefully.

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I thought it might be the first time he had actually called me by my name. I hadn't been sure he even knew it.

"Listen to me carefully. There are no tricks of the light on the isle. If you see a shadow move, it is not your imagination. If you hear footsteps by your side, it is not a rabbit. If you feel a lingering foreboding, you are not alone. Above all, you must trust your instincts. The rules you learned in your old life will not serve you here."

"I apologize for causing you trouble," I said formally.

He snorted. "What trouble is it for me to ride in my own woods?"

It was a lie. I was beginning to pick up on his manner of speech. The ways he deceived. For instance, this time, he had phrased it as a question.

It was a nice lie though. Of course, I had been a bother. He had been forced to ride out to rescue me through a veritable bog. It was hardly the finest way to spend one's evening.

When we returned to the castle, he led me to his study. I lifted my head to gaze at the tall, wooden walls, open to the night sky. The room was lit in the soft glow of candlelight. It was lovely, just the sort of place I'd gladly spend hours. I wondered briefly if there were any human books here.

"Rosie," he called.

My lady's maid hopped to his side.

"Tea, please."

Her frantic eyes darted between us before she hurried off.

Then he nudged me toward a velvet chair.

"I'm fine, really. I'll just head to my room."

He snorted. "Not yet."

I watched him pick at the shelves, gliding across them on a wooden ladder. His fingers stopped as they reached a particularly large volume. He pulled it, scaled down the ladder, and dropped it on the small table next to me.

The table shook with its weight. It was old and leather bound. Some of the pages were nearly falling out. Its binding was hand-sewed, and the words were written in thick, dark ink.

"What's this?" I asked.

"I want you to take this book and read it from cover to cover. Do not share it with anyone else." He flipped the volume open, and a plume of dust erupted from its pages, revealing thick, dark ink scrawl. His fingers danced along the edges, flipping a few more pages along. "Start here."

"What is this?" I repeated.

His jaw was clenched.

It was unfair. I was the one who had been in danger, and yet, he was angry. I admit I shouldn't have wandered so far, but his reaction was too much.

He ignored my question and started to leave the room. He made it all the way to the door before throwing back one final demand. "And drink your damn tea!" he growled with ferocity.

I looked down at the pages and began to read.

## The Unseelie Queen

Legendary and ancient, the Unseelie Queen is one of a kind. She is older than the isle's Great Oak. She walks in mist and darkness, and only the damned know her true face. Though her attire may change, she is known to wear a crown of human bones.

My stomach turned as I read the words "human bones." How close had I come to becoming a part of that horrific crown? I read on.

She is the ruler of the unseelie, the court of malevolent fae who prefer cruelty and chaos. Her court's loyalty to her is immense.

She hunts and preys on mortals and seelie alike. If footsteps fall in darkness, if you walk not the night path alone, she is with you. She will whisper to you, echoing your deepest desires. If you reply, you have entered her web.

Mortals are her easiest prey. She often stalks their world. For upon them, her power is the greatest. Rarely, she needs to speak to them at all. She has claimed thousands. One word from their weak, fallible lips, and they belong to her. Never to be seen in light again. Swallowed in her darkness. Enslaved for eternity.

The best defense is awareness. If you hear the sounds of footfalls or feel her presence, do not speak, and do not run. Block her words from your mind. Return to the light. She will not follow.

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How close I came to a terrible fate. Without Forrest...

My hand shook, and I let out a small whimper.

Rosie hopped up to me, nudging the cup gently toward me. "You heard the master, drink up. It'll help."

I accepted the cup of tea. Blossoms floated at the top. One sip and the effects are immediate. I felt ever-so-slightly calmer.

It occurred to me that Forrest could dose me with this at every meal... and worse. But he clearly didn't. That confused me. I didn't have room for that thought right now, so I pushed it down.

"Now, tell me what happened," Rosie said calmly. "Talking always helps."

A few days ago, I would have said nothing. Turned my head. Ignored her. Ignored the book. But now, I knew I could not. Rosie had been nothing but kind to me. She was the only confidant I had here, in this new world. And tonight had made it abundantly clear, I could not do this on my own.

I wouldn't survive.

## CHAPTER 15

### The Fae King

Later that night, Harry found me in my bedroom, downing my third goblet of faerie wine. The wisps hovered above my bed, strobing beautiful colors, a light show for my inebriated self. Every few minutes, I would remember I was angry at them and try to swat them away.

When Harry knocked, I conjured a gust of ocean air to blow the wisps out the window.

Eyeing the window, Harry waved his hand and vines crawled up the wall and bound the windows closed. "I take it you're having a bad evening," he said.

I looked at him and sighed. "Nothing is going to plan."

"Care to elaborate?"

"We're engaged. I've brought her to the island. Yet, I'm still cursed. What does this wretched magic require? A formal wedding ceremony? A tumble in the sheets? Her love? My love?" The last one was unthinkable. How could I ever love a human?

Harry was quiet as he let me think out loud.

"She nearly got herself killed tonight," I groaned.

Harry stopped nodding along. "What?"

"The Unseelie Queen."

"No," he moaned. "She hasn't been sighted in decades."

I let out a deep sigh. "She wore a crown of bones. I'm sure."



"Thank goodness you reached Georgia in time." He shuddered. "The Unseelie Queen is not a pretty fate."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, feeling stress in every nook and cranny on my body. "I've given her my family's Book of Iron."

Harry looked taken aback. "Really?"

I was pacing now, but I couldn't help it. "What else can I do? I can't very well cage her in these rooms, and I certainly can't be with her every hour of the day. If she's going to survive, she needs to be smarter. She has no idea what she's up against, what we're up against. The unseelie have no rules."

Harry was studying me, quietly and carefully.

I was frustrated, waiting for his reply. I had just unloaded everything, and he was still quiet. "So, what do I do? I'm no closer to breaking this curse than I was a week before she arrived."

He gave me the slightest smile. "Why not get to know her a little better? Perhaps, if you're lucky, she'll simply lift the curse herself."

"Another wasted hope, I'm afraid. There's no way that girl is a witch. You should have seen her out there. She was utterly helpless."

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I thought again of her wading through the marsh—her boot missing, hemline heavy with mud, and eyes wide with fear. In that moment, I desperately wanted to protect my stolen human bride. I wanted to clutch her against my chest until her racing heart quieted. I also wanted to rip the Unseelie Queen apart limb by limb and scatter her to the winds, so her spirit of chaos could never reform. Of course, any act of open violence would have ignited a war.

Harry considered. "How old was Georgia when her mother passed? Perhaps too young to learn witchcraft. Still, it runs through her veins. That's something."

It was something, but was it enough to save us both?

The unseelie would unseat me, and they would destroy everything in their path—the island and her kingdom too.

## CHAPTER 16

### The Stolen Bride

As always, Forrest was not at breakfast the following morning. So rude. But he had left a small note under my tea cup.

Little Sparrow,

Meet me in my study tomorrow, an hour past sunset. A late dinner will be served immediately afterward. Don't be late, and do try not to get yourself killed before then.

Forrest

More rudeness. Didn't the Fae King possess an ounce of manners? Though I had to admit what he lacked in manners was made up for in successful rescue attempts.

How many times had he saved me now?

Then again, he had dragged me into this danger. If it weren't for him, I would be safely at home, preparing for another ill-fated ball. I would be dancing with dignitaries and royals thrice my age. None with a body like Forrest. I remembered how it felt to be pressed against his hard chest with one warm arm encircling my waist as we rode home last night.

I blushed. Maybe harrowing life-or-death experiences were underrated...

Only an hour had passed since breakfast, but I felt restless. Ordinarily, I would wander, searching for my sister, but I wasn't ready to return to the woods again. Not yet. Not with the memory of the Unseelie Queen so fresh on my mind.

Still, I had to do something. There were many hours until my meeting with the Fae King, and I wasn't sure how to fill them. The truth was... I wasn't accustomed to having free time.

At home, my days had been rigidly scheduled. I had formal meals, took lessons, practiced my lute, helped Magnolia with her schoolwork, engaged in social events, and entertained the wives and daughters of important political visitors. It was also socially necessary for me to change my clothes and hair at least twice per day.

I hardly had time to breathe.

My favorite moments were the ones where I was able to sneak in little things like

reading or strolling the gardens with Magnolia.

Throughout my entire life, someone had always been in my ear, telling me what to do next. Here, the Fae King and his sparse staff seemed content to allow me to fill my days as I wished.

It was a terrific burden. Without my duty to my crown, father, and younger sister, I scarcely knew what to do with myself. I had never been permitted to choose how to spend my time before.

I realized I didn't know how. Who was I without my duty? What did I want out of my life? How did I want to spend my days? They were important questions, ones I had never considered before.

Perhaps, I could start soon.

But only after I found my sister, Briar, and made my family whole again.

I decided to go to the place where I always found answers—the library. Not Forrest's private study, comfortable as it was, but the proper royal library.

Surely, they had one.

Without another moment's hesitation, I tucked Forrest's Book of Iron under my arm and went to find Harry. I would need directions.

After searching the dining room, I found him in the entry hall with one hand on the door.

"Harry," I called out.

He turned, and I noticed worry lines on his face.

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"Am I interrupting?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I'm on my way to a meeting, but if there's something you need-"

I waved away his concern. "I won't keep you. I just wanted to know if there is a library in the castle."

"Of course. If you're ready to go now, I'd be happy to escort you. I have a meeting in ten minutes, but the library is on my way."

I agreed, and we walked in uneasy silence.

I wondered if he was angry with me. In truth, I owed him an apology. So, I slowed my steps and looked up at him. "I'm sorry."

He looked down at me and tugged absentmindedly on a lock of his curly hair. "For what?"

"For wandering. You offered to take me anywhere I wanted to go, but I never asked. Not once. Instead, I put myself in danger over and over again, and I just expected you and Rosie to come find me. That was selfish."

He stopped me in the hallway, putting his hands gently on my shoulders. "No, Georgia. It is I who should be apologizing. You are the future bride of our king. It was my duty to protect you, and I failed."

I shook my head. "You're being far too kind. I know you have many duties. I've seen

you meeting with diplomats and attending council meetings. You are not my personal guard, and it was selfish of me to make you act as such. It won't happen again."

He nodded. "I'm glad to hear you're taking your safety more seriously. It would kill Forrest if something happened to you."

I gave him a bemused smile. "Oh, I doubt that. He barely even knows I'm here."

For one brief moment, his eyes met mine with a rare intensity. "That book you carry says otherwise."

I followed his eyes to the Book of Iron tucked under my arm.

"Do you know what that is, Georgia?"

I nodded. "It has information about fae."

"It's more than that. Books of Iron are considered heirlooms. They're passed down through the family line. They are never, ever read by outsiders, and I'm not sure a human has ever been gifted one. Even as a loan."

I stared at him in confusion.

"Don't you see? He has given you the most powerful weapon he has. Knowledge you could wield even against him. He has chosen to trust you. Maybe you should do the same."

I was quiet the rest of our walk, thinking about what Harry had said. Forrest couldn't possibly care about me. He was probably just trying to lighten his burden. If I could protect myself, he wouldn't have to bother.

Finally, we reached a large arched entryway, and I stood at the precipice of the largest library I had ever seen. The fae lived for centuries. Sometimes even a millennia. What amazing, hidden knowledge must rest upon these shelves?

Harry gave me a gentle nudge inside. "Enjoy your day," he said with a chuckle.

I hurried to the first row of shelves, running my hand along the spines as I studied the titles— The Complete Guide to Pixie Dust Potencies, Whispers of the Wind: A Memoir, and Glimmering Gardens and the Secrets They Keep.

I picked the last one off the shelf and began to flip curiously through its pages before I caught myself. No, I scolded, purpose before pleasure.

My purpose was to locate my sister, and I was certain something in here could help me. A census? A book on stolen bride customs? A magic book with locator spells? The possibilities were endless.

I tucked the gardening book under my arm but focused on the task at hand.

Half an hour later, I had claimed a small table on the first level of the library, tucked away in a corner. I was on my way back with another seven books stacked high in my arms when I bumped into someone. "Oof," I said as the books knocked the wind out of my chest.

Then the stack of books began to topple over. However, to my surprise, they didn't hit the floor. The man I slammed into caught them with ease. He regarded me over top of them. His hair was even darker than Forrest's, and he had olive skin and golden eyes. "It looks like you have quite a bit of reading planned." He chuckled.

I looked over at him sheepishly and reached out to accept my books. "I'm so sorry. I can take those."



Good-naturedly, he waved my offer away. "It's no trouble. Where are you sitting? I'll move them over. You can hardly see over them."

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"On that table over there," I said, gesturing ten or more shelves away.

With a lazy wave of his hand, a gust of wind rose in the library, whipping my hair around my neck and hovering my stack of books just beside him.

My eyes widened at his casual show of power, but I didn't say anything. I led the way, and he followed, floating my once-teetering stack of books.

"Are you a visiting academic?" he asked, cocking his head to one side.

I smiled. I wished. What freedom to spend one's life among the stacks, ensconced in fantastic adventures, whirlwind romances, and, of course, knowledge? "No," I said sadly. "I am Princess Georgia. I-"

"Am betrothed to the king," he finished for me.

I hesitated. I wasn't sure if it was wise to divulge that to a stranger, but we were inside the castle. Also, Harry had walked me here with no complaints, so I had to assume it was safe, or as safe as anywhere in the fae realm could be.

After a short pause, I confirmed it. "I am."

He bowed formally at the waist. "It's a pleasure to meet you at last."

"At last?" I asked.

"My apologies. That was a poor introduction." He laughed. "I am called Hawthorne,

and I am seated on your betrothed's council of advisors. My specialty is in court politics, specifically the unseelie."

Hair rose on the back of my neck, and I took a quick step backward. My memory of the Unseelie Queen was all too recent. "The unseelie?" I echoed. "I heard they cannot be governed, that they prefer chaos."

He chuckled again. "You could say that. Though, even the unseelie share common aims."

I crossed my arms over my chest and snapped, "Yes, their aim seems to be to kill me and destroy my kingdom."

He frowned. "I apologize if I've offended you, princess. While I am the king's expert on the unseelie, it does not mean I agree with all of their actions. I am, in fact, part-human myself."

Some of the tension in my shoulders loosened. I was so wound up just being on this island that I was suspicious of everyone and everything on it, even this man who had been nothing but kind to me. "Of course not. I was too quick to judge."

He shook his head. "A natural reaction, especially from someone who has just been dragged into a dangerous new world."

Dragged? Hmm. That was an interesting choice of words for someone on the king's council. He said he was part-human. I wondered how much time he had spent on the mainland.

He continued to beam that same unrelentingly friendly smile at me. It was a nice juxtaposition from the Fae King's alternating sour and seductive moods.

"What I do enjoy is a nice sit in the library and a good book," he added, gesturing around.

I met his smile with one of my own. It had been too long since I had an opportunity to discuss something I enjoyed as much as reading. I wondered if he had read any human books. "I do, as well."

"May I?" he asked, picking up the book on the top of my stack.

I nodded. "Please." Maybe, if I was lucky, he'd accidentally drop some critical piece of information in my lap that would help me find my sister. A girl could dream.

"Ah, Runes of Power. An interesting choice."

"Have you read it?" I asked.

"Not in over a decade, but the chapters on summoning were intriguing." He lifted each book in my stack, perusing their titles one by one.

Finally, he looked down at me and cocked his head to one side. "Is there someone you're seeking, princess?"

I bit my lip, uncertain whether I should confide in this stranger.

Before I could make up my mind, he added, "You may find me particularly helpful as I hear whispers from not just this court but many others, too."

He had hit on my worst fear. What if Briar wasn't on the island? What if she had been spirited away to some far-flung court? Ones I had only heard the faintest of whispers about. Ones I wasn't even sure existed. She could be somewhere I would never find her.

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With that thought, I was filled with resolve. I couldn't let this opportunity slip away. If Hawthorne told the Fae King, so be it.

So far, Hawthorne had been one of the most pleasant fae I had encountered. I didn't want to deceive him, but I wasn't sure I could trust him with the whole truth. Not yet.

So, I smiled sadly and looked at my shoes. "Yes," I admitted. "My sister was taken as a fae bride many years ago. I wish to find her and invite her to my wedding."

He appraised me for a moment, and I could tell his mind was turning. He knew I was lying. I was almost certain of it. Finally, he spoke, "Being stolen away to a strange world must be"—he paused as if searching for the right word—"difficult. I must admit I find the tradition unsavory. No offense intended."

That was an understatement. "That's kind of you. It has been difficult. There are few humans on the island, not even many with human lineage in their family trees such as yours. It can be a bit isolating."

He nodded as if making up his mind right then and there. He flashed that kind smile once more. "It would be my honor to help reunite the two of you."

My heart leaped in my chest. Really? He would help? I couldn't believe my good fortune at running into him. Finally, the tides of fate were turning in my favor once more.

"What is her name?" he asked.

"Briar," I said softly.

He nodded as if committing her name to his memory. "I'll make some quiet inquiries. Where can I find you?"

I decided on the spot that this library would be a part of my new daily routine. So, I said, "I often come here during the day."

He nodded. "Very well. It was a pleasure to meet you, Princess Georgia."

I inclined my head, a grin still pulling at the corners of my lips. "And you, Hawthorne."

Before he left, he thumbed through my stack of books and handed me the one entitled, *Glimmering Gardens and the Secrets They Keep*. "Start with this one," he said with a knowing nod.

Then he disappeared, leaving me with my stack of books.

## CHAPTER 17

### The Fae King

Even I couldn't justify skipping an entire week of council meetings. Not when the Unseelie Queen was so obviously testing my weaknesses. There was no chance Georgia had simply wandered into her path.

The Unseelie were growing bolder.

If my suspicions were correct, there would be more testing of our defenses. Perhaps, my council would have more news tonight. So, I dutifully made my way to the

council chambers, hoping the meeting would be filled with its usual tedium—boring political machinations, posturing, and favor swapping.

I reached the council entrance at the same time as him, the vicious little viper. "Hawthorne," I said, inclining my head so little I wasn't sure it was perceptible.

He paused and swept into a dramatic bow. "Greetings, my king. You are well?"

I wanted to say I was exceedingly well, but that would have been a lie, which was why the wretched snake had asked in the first place. So, instead, I replied, "Better than I deserve."

After all, why should I deserve to be exceedingly well? I was a fool king who had been cursed by an imp of a human witch, scarcely five feet tall. I had a tenuous grasp on my crown, and I was putting the entire isle at risk in this weakened state.

Hawthorne's eyes narrowed in suspicion, but his expression quickly turned to polite concern. "And your bride? How does she fare? I heard she had an encounter with the Unseelie Queen."

"Did you?" I asked through gritted teeth. What part did he play in all this? I already had Harry and Rosie watching over Georgia, but perhaps, I needed to add on to her guard. How would it look to my people and council if I couldn't protect my own bride?

Within the castle, the council room was hidden in the safe, sturdy trunk of an ancient tree. Perfect for deadening sound from any passing eavesdroppers and camouflaged from those who might expect such a meeting to take place in a grand hall. The tree spirit also had a mind of his own, occasionally picking up roots and moving when the mood struck.

As we ducked through the tree's hollow and entered the council chambers, I was able to slip away from Hawthorne and his not-so-subtle fact finding mission. The rest of my council was already milling around the small, wooden room.

Upon my entrance, several of them came to greet me with jovial smiles, congratulations, and hearty claps on the back. Now, this was a victory. It didn't seem like anyone thought my soul was rotting now. I was soon to be a happily married man, after all.

"Congratulations on your new bride! Tell us how you wooed her," said one of the elder members with a fond smile.



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"Business first," I said, taking my place at the head of the large oak table.

Everyone took their places, and the meeting began in earnest.

There were the usual territory disputes, common among the folk. Often I declined to rule on these and forced the parties to resolve their own differences. As a rule, the folk didn't like a heavy-handed king. The only laws we truly answered to were those of nature.

I drummed my fingers on the tabletop, wishing the meeting was over. "Other matters?" I asked, hoping to keep things moving along.

Rowan, an ancient fae with a long white beard, cleared his throat. "Yes, your majesty. One of a personal nature. While you were away collecting your bride, we were able to secure the return of your father's sword from the little folk under the hill. Thunderblade is now in the royal armory being sharpened and cleaned."

That was good news. My father had never lost a battle with the sword, and I liked the idea of keeping it nearby. "Excellent. And what of the thieves?"

"If they or their children ever ride to battle, all of their swords will shatter and fail. Also, the tall ones used our raid as cover to reclaim their territory near the great oak."

"Fitting."

From there, the conversation took a dark turn—disappearances. While I was away, three servants had gone missing. Each served an important member of the court.

"The unseelie," I murmured, my suspicions now confirmed.

"Indeed," answered one of the members.

"Were they taken, or were they spies?" I asked.

The elder Rowan spoke again. "Taken, majesty. My guard is one of the missing. He has served me honorably for two centuries. He didn't take a single personal effect with him, not even his sword."

A redcap growled low under his breath. "A warrior would never leave his sword."

I nodded and turned to Hawthorne, our supposed expert on the unseelie. "Hawthorne, what do you make of these disappearances? Do you believe they are the work of the unseelie?"

He bowed his head in feigned deference. "Without more information, it is hard to be certain. However, the unseelie queen has expressed an interest in meeting with you, king."

I chose my words carefully. "I have no quarrel with the unseelie queen. However-"

Rowan's younger brother, Remus, pushed back his chair and exploded, "Except for her wretched hurricane!"

My mouth quirked into an amused smile. This was why I kept Remus on the council. He often said what needed to be said and in far less diplomatic terms than I ever could. "Quite," I agreed. Not a month ago, the unseelie had unleashed a fierce hurricane that had been set on a path to blaze across our shores before making landfall in the human kingdom. It was a violation of our shores and waters as well as the human's land. While I had no real love for the mortals, I had no wish for war

either. I had been forced to intervene.

Remus flushed, and his jaw worked in irritation. "Sorry, my king. I didn't mean to interrupt. It's just she could have taken out half of the island along with the human territory!"

"I agree," I said.

"The Unseelie Queen wishes to send her apologies on that matter. A member of her cabinet informed me the wind sprites grew restless," Hawthorne said, brazenly looking around at the council as he dished out this obvious falsehood.

I snorted. "Restless wind sprites? Do you believe that?"

Hawthorne inclined his head in more feigned deference. "It is not my job to believe or not, my king. The Unseelie Queen has given a message, and I have shared it. What you do with it is your decision and yours alone."

The aged Rowan pointed a gnarled finger at Hawthorne. "See, here, boy. You are on a council of advisors. Your job is to advise. We don't need an errand boy for the Dread Queen."

A few people glanced around the table at the slur "Dread Queen." I hid my smile. I'd have Harry send over two bottles of our finest wine to Rowan and Remus's rooms later.

Hawthorne's eyes flashed, and through tight lips, he said to me, "The unseelie queen could be a powerful ally against the humans."

"We are not at war with the humans," I reminded him.

A redcap with a dark beard boomed, "Why not?" He stroked his red, bloodstained cap lovingly, hopefully. Redcaps were violent fae. They lived for war and combat. With each victory, they dipped their hats in the blood of their slain enemies.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "Because we are at peace. The humans are no threat to us."

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"Peace is for the weak," muttered the redcap. "That storm might have taken out a chunk of their settlement along the seaside."

Hawthorne nodded as if considering this for the first time. "If the hurricane had been allowed to continue along its path, nearly half the coast would have been wiped out. Half the humans, half the problem."

"And what of the other half who would come with their best warriors and mages? What of the ripped up trees, coral reef destruction, and washed up fish? What of the delicate sea oats and the turtle eggs hiding within? Would you have us wipe them out as well?"

Rowan cleared his throat once more. "Wisely said, my king. The humans were once a threat, but they fear us now. It has been many generations since any of their rulers have made a move against us. And now you are marrying one of their own, a princess. I'd say relations are better than ever."

I nodded. There was no need to tell them exactly how my bride had come to our shores. Though needless to say, I didn't expect the humans to send wedding gifts anytime soon.

Rowan continued on, inclining his head in deference to the redcap. "However, we will need the redcaps to continue their fierce defense of our shores."

The redcap narrowed his eyes but nodded. "There is no glory in defeating a weak foe. Bring us one worthy of our skills, oh king. Then we will prove ourselves on even footing."

"I trust you would." Unless I wanted this meeting to turn into a war council, I needed to wrap things up. "Hawthorne, deny the unseelie queen in the most politic way possible, but deny her all the same. I cannot meet with her just weeks after she has just taken such a hostile act without appearing to reward it. There is also the matter of these disappearances. I want those looked into... quietly." I glanced at two fae who had not spoken throughout the meeting, a brother and sister dressed in pale gray robes. My spies. Barely perceivable, one nodded. "I also agree that the redcaps must continue to fiercely defend our isle. No human vessels must be allowed to cross into our waters. If they try, drag them to the bottom of the sea or slay their occupants one by one. The choice is yours."

The redcap lowered his head. "Yes, my king."

It wasn't wise not to give the redcaps something to do. I hoped this would continue to satisfy their bloodthirst. They were advantageous allies at war time, but during peace they could be difficult to control.

"We will continue to monitor the situation with both the humans and the unseelie. And on that note, are we ready to adjourn?" I was ready to return to my wine and stargazing.

Several heads nodded, and papers and chairs began to shuffle.

"You never told us about your happy news, king," Hawthorne prodded, returning to the subject of my new bride.

Rowan placed a hand on my back. "Yes, majesty, when are the nuptials? We know how you enjoy a good celebration."

Remus chimed in, "It's been far too long since our last revel!"

Hawthorne listened with a gleam in his eye.

I tried not to let my displeasure show on my face. I wasn't ready for Georgia to interact with the court. Our relationship was too tenuous. I had no idea what she would do or say.

There was also the threat of the unseelie. A revel would last days and bring in a myriad of visitors to our court. How many more would disappear during the tumult? How many secrets would slip through wine-soaked lips?

Curse my reputation. Of course, they would be expecting a party.

Still, I had to play the part. They had to believe I was merely blowing off daytime business. I was the hedonist king, and it was time to put on a show.

So, I gave them my best roguish grin, kicked my feet up on the table, and announced with bravado, "A revel to end all revels! On the next full moon, we will celebrate the engagement. I expect each and every one of you there. And no stuffy business talk."

"No, my king," several chorused, grinning back at me.

Thanks to Hawthorne and his rumors about soul rot, I couldn't pass up this party. Not without losing my crown.

I only hoped tonight's meeting with Georgia would go better than our dinner.

## CHAPTER 18

### The Stolen Bride

I paced outside of the Fae King's study, unsure of whether to go in or not. Why had he

asked me here tonight? Did he wish to harangue me for wandering in the woods after dark? Did he wish to discuss wedding preparations? I truly had no idea. The man was so hot and cold. I found I didn't understand him at all.

Our first meeting had been nothing short of electric. Down by the pond, cast in moonlight, he had been equal parts seductive and charming. The magnetic pull between us had been undeniable. As much as I hated to admit it now, I had hoped my father would present him as a marriage candidate.

On our second meeting, I had been desperate, seeking my lost golden shell. He had taken advantage of my moment of weakness and deceived me. He had bound us together in this way I could not escape.

Then on our third meeting, he had turned into a monster. A fae. A bringer of storms and destruction. He had threatened my family and stolen me away.



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But that monster had saved my life, twice.

Upon our arrival, just outside his dark bedchambers, he had not asked for what I was not yet willing to give. He had not once slipped into my bedroom uninvited or demanded my presence in his.

I was provided for—my room was comfortable, the meals were extravagant, new clothing filled my wardrobe, and his staff looked after me with care. He had allowed me to roam his island freely.

None of this made him a hero, but it also meant he wasn't a monster. No matter how much I wanted him to be. If he were, it would be simpler. I could truly hate him. But the Fae King was... complex.

And so were my feelings.

Had he really given me his Book of Iron because he cared? Is that why he had entrusted me with its wealth of generational secrets?

Someone cleared their throat behind me. I jumped and turned to see Harry. "You scared me!" I said, placing my hand over my heart.

He grinned. "Go on. He won't bite."

I should have done as he said, but my head and heart were still too full of uncertainties. "Why? Why am I here?"

His easy smile faltered. "That's a question you will have to ask Forrest. Not me." I bit my lip. "You're right, of course." I paused, then admitted, "But I feel stupid."

"You're not stupid. Talk to him. Get to know him. You might find he's not so bad when you get past the surface."

I stood there for another moment, pondering his words. Did I want to get to know the Fae King? I wasn't sure. Yet, I knew I couldn't continue living like this, tiptoeing around our rooms and waiting for his summons. I needed to know what I was to him. Did he truly intend to marry me, or was I some sort of pet?

"Thanks, Harry," I said.

He patted me awkwardly on the shoulder. "Go on."

I gathered my courage and turned the door knob.

Forrest must have heard me enter with those large, pointed ears, but he didn't look up. He was sitting in a large leather wingback chair, thumbing through an ancient text. The binding appeared to be unraveling, and a page or two appeared close to falling on the floor.

In front of him was a small table with tea service and a second wingback chair.

I walked closer and said, "Good evening."

He made a sound in the back of his throat that indicated he was not having a good evening. Then gestured for me to sit. "Sit down. We have much to discuss."

"Yes, we do," I said, frowning.

"Would you care for tea?" he offered in a stilted formal tone, gesturing to the tray in front of us.

When I was nervous, I found it always helpful to have a cup of tea nearby. It stopped me from fiddling with my gown or hair. Something my governess had despised. "You can't simply wear your heart on your sleeve. You are a princess," she had admonished.

So, I accepted his offer and moved to pour myself a cup.

To my surprise, he stopped me. "Please, allow me," he said.

I watched as he lifted the teapot with care, his elegant fingers caressing the fragile porcelain. He poured the amber liquid into a small tea cup shaped like a lotus. "How do you take your tea?" he asked.

"Um, just honey please."

Wordlessly, he obliged, swirling a small spoon of honey.

I was bewildered by his sudden show of polite attentiveness. Other than servants, no man had ever poured me a cup of tea. The act of service felt strangely intimate.

He returned the cup to its saucer beside me.

I sipped in a thick silence that neither of us dared to break. Finally, I couldn't take it any longer. A dam burst within me, and I blurted out, "I want to know why I'm here."

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He frowned in confusion. "The study? If you'd rather, we could move to the terrace, I suppose? The weather is-"

"Not here," I gestured around the room wildly. "Why am I on this island? Why did you choose me? What exactly are your intentions?"

He reached out and took my shaking hands in his much larger ones. Instinctively, my eyes turned up toward his piercing green ones. He was so beautiful. All of the fae were, but he was even more stunning than the others. Don't be foolish, I cautioned myself. They are glamours.

But I knew they weren't just glamours. Even in his weakened state the other day, he still possessed high cheekbones, a long, regal nose, and that lustrous black hair that I could imagine running my hands through.

Sitting this close to him and with his eyes locked on mine, I felt my breath catch. Was he going to kiss me?

Instead, he spoke, "I've neglected you since your arrival. You are my responsibility, and I never should have allowed you to wander those woods alone. For that, I apologize."

He spoke of me like I was a child—silly, unguarded, and in need of protection. Maybe in his world I was, but it wasn't what I wanted to talk about. I pulled my hands away. "I don't want your apologies. I want answers."

He considered me for a long, thoughtful moment. "And what are your questions?"

Demands rolled off my tongue like a tsunami. "I want to know why I'm here and what your intentions are. I want to know where you go during the day, and why you've been avoiding me. I want to know that you've kept your vow, that my sister and father are safe. I want to see Briar again. "

He blinked several times as my words washed over him. Then he straightened in his chair. "I will answer your questions, if you answer mine."

"Your questions?" I asked in surprise. What questions could he possibly have of me? I had no secrets.

His face turned thoughtful. "I despise lies. Will you be truthful with me, little sparrow? Could we, one day, share an intimacy of the mind as well as body?" He tipped my chin up to look at him. "Will you lie to me?"

I swallowed and licked my dry lips. "Yes," I admitted.

A smile flickered across his face. "Thank you." Then he kissed my lips softly.

I closed my eyes, but it was over as soon as it had begun—like a whisper, like a secret, like a promise. One I was beginning to hope he would keep.

"Any other answer would have been a lie," he said. "Despite that, I will answer your questions. First, you are here because I intend to marry you."

My jaw hung open in surprise. Somehow, I had convinced myself otherwise.

"I'm sorry I made you feel that was not so. In two week's time, we will celebrate our engagement with a Full Moon Revel. Fae from all of the courts will attend."

My heart was still racing from his kiss. Still, I had to pull myself together, he had

only given me one answer. "What about my family?" I pressed.

"Your father and sister are unharmed, as promised. I've even had the wisps check in a few times."

"Why did you choose me?" I asked.

He paused and held my gaze for a long moment. "When we met by the pond that first night, you were wild and free and so beautiful. Did you feel nothing?"

I felt a blush burn across my cheeks. I had felt many things.

He caressed my flushed cheek. "Your lips may lie, but you're blushing. I rather like that. Be mine. You'll have the finest clothing and jewels. You'll never want for anything."

I pulled back. "You must be joking! You thought what? You would drag me here, and I would simply fall head over heels for you?"

"Why not? I'm handsome. I'm rich. I'm powerful. "

Of course, he was handsome enough for anyone. Though I'd not be saying that to him. "You think human women are so cheaply bought."

His brow furrowed. "I've seen many human women marry for wealth and for standing."

I rose from my chair. "You forget. I lack neither," I said with venom dripping in my tone. "You'll have to offer something more." I reached down, my eyes locked on his, and tapped the fae king's chest, right above his hollowed heart.

CHAPTER 19

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### The Fae King

She thumped my chest, right above my rotting heart, and her ocean eyes battered me like relentless waves. It was as if she knew what lay beneath my tunic, as if she could see clearly the dark circle that surrounded my heart.

She wanted more?

What more did I have to give?

Without another word, she turned her back on me and began to walk away. In her haste, she had forgotten my family's Book of Iron. She was almost to the door when remorse washed over me.

"Wait," I rang out.

She stopped for only a fraction of a second.

I lifted the ancient book from the table. It had been passed down through many generations. Within its pages were entries on all types of fae, our rivals and our allies alike. Their strengths, weaknesses, and secrets were scrawled on each page in a special ink that hid from prying eyes. It was, in short, a grimoire for faeries. She was the first person I had ever shared it with. I offered it to her again. "Please, at least take this with you. Make sure you finish reading it."

She looked like she might simply walk out of the door, but she returned and snatched the book from my hands.



Before I could say anything more, she was gone, leaving me with my thoughts and regrets. It was true I hadn't known many humans. Sure, I had interacted with them in brief conversations and bargains over the centuries.

But I had never lived with one. I had certainly never kissed one. I trailed my fingers over my mouth. Her lips had been so soft and gentle. So unfae. I hated myself for it, but I knew I would think of that kiss for hours, even days, to come.

## CHAPTER 20

### The Stolen Bride

That night, I couldn't sleep. My mind insisted on replaying my evening with Forrest, one tantalizing moment at a time. It lingered in anxiety over our argument and in breathless anticipation over our brief kiss.

Finally, I sat up and fumbled on my nightstand for a match. I struck it and lit my candle. Then I reached under my bed and pulled out the book Hawthorne had recommended—Glimmering Gardens and the Secrets They Keep. Perhaps, a little late night reading would put me to sleep.

The book wasn't a reference guide as I had expected. There were no useful sections on medicinal herbs or magical houseplants. Instead, it was brimming with accounts of renowned gardens throughout the ages and detailed illustrations and planting guides.

First, I read about the Garden of Alexandria where they had brought water to the desert through innovative new methods. Some of which even the author couldn't ascertain. A blooming rooftop amid the arid sand was something to behold. I found my mind wandering already, beginning to think of how I might set up my own irrigation system using similar methods.

The next section was on a witch's garden. She had numerous plots, each with separate purposes. One of them caught my eye called simply Memory Garden. As I looked at the watercolor diagram, I felt a stirring in my chest. One I couldn't quite place. The hues of blue and white flowers surrounded by a tranquil sea of rosemary were unusual. So few flowers were blue. I wondered if they were flowers from other realms. I wanted to read on, but I yawned and rubbed my eyes.

Sleep was calling, and my candle was nearly burned down to ash. I blew it out and rested my head on my pillow.

I was out before I knew it.

I dreamed of a hedgerow and a hidden garden with blue and white flowers, of bright sunlight, of momma's laugh.

After breakfast, a box arrived just outside my door.

I stared at it with suspicion. Was this some sort of bribe from Forrest? He had done quite enough with that book he gave me. I had briefly flipped through its pages last night. It contained page after page of faeries, cataloging their weaknesses. I was shocked he had given me such a powerful weapon.

Maybe he actually saw something in me. Maybe, just maybe, I was beginning to see something in him too. I brushed a finger against my lips where he had kissed me. It had been a good kiss but different than I had expected— gentle, soft, and fleeting. Coming from someone who could bring lightning down from the heavens, it had been a surprise.

As I carried the box inside, I noticed a note was taped to the top. Curiously, I opened it. I recognized the familiar tilting handwriting instantly.

Little Sparrow,

I can only imagine that your wild heart has quickened in anger upon the receipt of this gift. However, I assure you it is not my intention to buy your affections. You made it perfectly clear that I could not do so even if I tried.

And, I daresay, your esteem would be worth far more than any gown I could procure. Nonetheless, you must be clothed for the full moon revel, celebrating our engagement.

I apologize for my behavior last night. I know little of humans and even less of human women. I have several hours of appointments this evening, but I wonder... would you do me the honor of an evening stroll?

Yours,

Forrest

I took the box over to my bed and opened the top. Inside was a thin layer of tissue paper. I parted it, revealing a petal pink gown. It was sleeveless, and the bodice was shaped like flower petals in iridescent lavender and pale greens. The neckline was a sweetheart. I pulled the gown out of its box and held it up to myself in the mirror. It was beautiful.

The next box arrived not twenty minutes later. This time, I caught a messenger at the door and nodded my thanks.

Another gown. This one was aquamarine with crystal and pearls beaded into every inch of the bodice.

I couldn't resist. I grinned and pulled on the gown to twirl in the mirror. This one had a mermaid silhouette. The selkies would be beside themselves if they saw it. I giggled out loud at the thought.

"I'm glad to see Miss is having a nice time," squeaked a familiar voice.

I swirled around, nearly tripping, and looked down at my lady's maid. "Rosie, when did you get here?" I gasped.

She smiled, and her whiskers perked up. "Not long, miss. Would you like to try on the pink gown, too? I could unfold it for you."

I bit my lip. I had certainly been about to try it on, but I didn't want Forrest to know

how delighted I was with the gowns. It would undercut yesterday's talk. "Promise not to tell Forrest?" I asked.

"Tell him what?" she asked.

"How much I like the gowns."

She cocked her head to the side. "Why wouldn't mistress want the king to know? It would make him very happy."

"Exactly," I said.

"You two are a funny pair. Doing nice things for each other, then acting so cold. You know your betrothal bond gives you direct access to his chambers."

"Is that so?" I replied, only half listening, as I tried to reach the hook to remove the gown.

"You could just slide right into his bed and show him how grateful you are."

I held up a hand, my face coloring, "Rosie!" I cried.

"Just a thought."

There was another knock at the door. Rosie squeaked and hurried to open it. "Another dress," she announced.

"Another?" I asked.

"Of course," she replied.

"Why would I need three dresses for an engagement party?"

"Surely, you don't want to wear the same dress multiple nights?"

"Multiple nights?"

"Oh, yes! Your engagement party will be a full moon revel, miss. It won't just last one evening. It will last as long as the moon is full in the sky. Three nights for a dull event. Five for a really smashing one! Of course, miss's will be five."

"Fantastic," I mumbled. What in the world had I gotten myself into? I could barely make it through the stuffy balls back home. Now, I had to do five consecutive nights with the fae. I had heard stories of humans who entered their circles and danced until they died.

I hoped Forrest was going to send some comfortable shoes too.

## CHAPTER 21

### The Fae King

Isat on my bed in frog form. Usually, I tried to stay up as late into the night as possible, so that I could sleep through this wretched part of the day.

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*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 10:12 am*

Rosie appeared with a return note from Georgia. I opened it at once.

Dearest Fae King,

I will gladly accept your offer of an evening stroll, if I can select our path.

Yours (contractually speaking),

Princess Georgia

P.S. Don't you think you're overdoing it with the gowns? There are at least ten here and even more shoes.

I laughed.

## CHAPTER 22

### The Stolen Bride

It was half an hour past the start of lunch, and my stomach was rumbling. I should have never wished for Forrest to send shoes. The blighted shoemaker had been here for three hours! How could one little cart hold so many shoes? I was beginning to suspect it was enchanted. I had tried on more than one hundred pairs.

Worse still, more gowns had arrived! I would be starved and worn ragged over fae fashion. I sat on the bed, resting, as the shoemaker mumbled something about finding the "right" pair. I was stretching my neck when I felt an unusually insistent sea breeze

tug at my locks. A note fluttered on the wind. This one was folded into the shape of a paper bird and tapped insistently at my shoulder. I rolled my eyes and accepted it.

Dearest Georgia,

You called me dearest. I could get used to the sound of that. Perhaps, I will hear it on your lips tonight. I will come to collect you as soon as my meeting ends. You may select our path, but only if I may point out the horrifying danger you will undoubtedly be leading us into.

Yours (in every possible meaning of the word),

Forrest

P.S. Only ten gowns? That's wholly inadequate. I'll have more sent immediately.

I snorted and snatched paper from my bedside drawer. Rosie had begun to stock the prettiest paper for me. Each piece was made of pressed flower petals. I quickly scrawled out my reply.

Detestable Forrest,

A dozen more gowns have arrived. This is obscene. Where will I put them? Also, kindly call off your shoemaker. I have no need for stilettos made of seaglass. And, for what purpose, would I wear a casual "shell-encrusted sandal?" My feet are bleeding just thinking of it.

Yours (contractually),

Georgia



Before I could find a servant to deliver the note, it was ripped out of my hand by a rogue sea breeze and drifted out the door. I smiled. Really? Did the Fae King have nothing better to do with his day? I couldn't find it in my heart to truly mean the admonishment.

At last, Rosie chased off the shoemaker. She could be surprisingly ferocious for such a small thing. She bared her sharp rabbit teeth at him, and when he still didn't move toward the door, she took a bite out of his pant's leg. That got him moving.

I should have apologized, but it was all I could do not to laugh out loud. I was far too hungry for the appropriate amount of decorum.

Soon after, he was giving us a sweeping bow and wishing us a good day.

At last, I was permitted to leave for lunch.

Harry was waiting at the table. "Good afternoon?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered, surprising myself with my own reply. I had enjoyed the letters, and I was looking forward to my stroll with Forrest. I wanted to visit the greenhouses. An idea had started to form. One that could change everything.

I buttered a multigrain roll. Harry passed me a piece of fish on a hearty bed of sea kelp, and I gratefully accepted it.

After a few bites, another letter arrived. I grinned and opened it at once.

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Delectable Georgia,

A stiletto made of seaglass? Color me intrigued. I'm certain a glamour could be embedded into the sandal to avoid any unnecessary blood shed. The same cannot be said for your wrath against the shoemaker, who I'm told is a very nice man.

As for the gowns, should I send a larger armoire?

Yours (in every way),

Forrest

P.S. If the gowns truly make you angry, please consider them for me, not you. The fae will expect a certain amount of pomp at the revel.

Harry offered me a quill, and I scratched out a quick reply on my napkin.

## CHAPTER 23

### The Fae King

Soon, a slip of paper was pushed under my door.

In my frog form, tasks like this were a little more difficult. Of course, I could use my power over the sea breeze to pull the paper to me, but in this form, it often left me feeling fatigued. Much easier to simply retrieve it myself.

So I made my way to the edge of the bed and jumped down on a soft pile of clothes. I hopped over to examine the note.

Dear Forrest,

I am considering you in a gown right now.

Georgia

I laughed out loud, something I hadn't done in a long time. Then I set the note aside. I really should be reading minutes from the council meeting I missed. We would have plenty of time to talk on our walk this evening. I wondered where she wanted to go.

## CHAPTER 24

### The Stolen Bride

After lunch, there was another knock at the door. I stormed forward, prepared to battle the shoemaker. Instead, a tall, lean fae woman stood in front of me, dressed in leather and with a smudge of soot on her cheek.

"Hello?" I greeted her uncertainly.

Rosie hopped forward. "Princess Georgia, may I introduce you to Lady Helena, our royal jeweler."

I looked at the woman in surprise. This woman dressed in leather and adorned with soot was a member of the court?

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said, giving me a small genteel curtsy and soft smile. She gestured toward her leathers. "Please forgive my appearance. I often work

in the smithery. Swords and battle axes need jewels as well."

Hidden among her cascade of dark, auburn hair, I noticed a small pointed cap. "Are you a redcap?" I asked curiously.

For a moment, her canines showed, and her eyes glinted dangerously.

I nearly took a step backward.

But she softened once more. "I am indeed. I'll admit it is an unusual profession for my kind, but I appreciate the delicate intricacies of life as well as the broad strokes of the battlefield."

I nodded and kept my mouth shut. The last thing I wanted to do was anger a redcap. They were renowned for their bloodthirst.

"Won't you come in and join me today for tea?" I asked. Wording was important with fae. It was never wise to give them an open invitation. You never knew when they'd arrive—in the dead of night ten years later or perhaps on the eve of your first born's birth?

Rosie led us to a small table and offered to fetch tea.

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"Just a small cup," said Lady Helena. Then she removed a leather pouch that had been slung across her hip. She unfurled it, revealing a vast array of dazzling rings, necklaces, and earrings. There were also pockets of loose stones and metal to twist and bend. No one but a redcap would dare stroll around with such riches.

"These are lovely," I said.

"There's no need to be polite. The king said not to leave until you'd selected at least ten pieces. If these don't suit your needs, I can craft anything you can imagine."

"Ten pieces?"

She looked confused. "Yes. I'm not to leave until you make your selection."

I thought through my gowns. What would look well together?

The first dress that came to mind was a gold, sequined one. So, I turned my eyes toward golden accessories. I saw an arm cuff with beautiful intricate leaves and a matching ear cuff that came up in a point like fae ears. It wasn't something I would have ever worn at home.

I pointed to the items. "Rosie, what do you think?"

She stepped closer and squeaked in delight. "Oh, you must. You absolutely must. Mistress will look like a proper fae queen."

I laughed. "These two then."

Helena nodded and set them to the side.

There were so many beautiful pieces. I wasn't sure what else to choose. The gowns had just appeared. The shoemaker had hoisted shoe after shoe upon me. Helena was asking me to select, but I wasn't sure how. I didn't understand their fashion, and I had never been particularly good at human fashion either.

I considered Helena's bejeweled dagger at her side. Would that count as a piece? No, I was more likely to be beguiled by a fae into stabbing myself than to actually use it for defense.

Sensing my hesitation, Helena asked, "Is there something you want but don't see? I can make anything you'd like."

"The truth is I'm not accustomed to fae style, and I'm not sure what would be appropriate."

She nodded and stood. "That's no trouble. Show me your gowns. Perhaps, I can point you in the right direction."

I eyed her warily. The woman despite her title of lady was dressed in leathers with soot on her cheek. I wasn't sure she was the person I wanted to take my fashion advice from.

She followed my gaze and laughed. "I assure you I'm not always fresh from the forges. I do know how to dress for court. And I'm sure your lady's maid would lend us her opinion too?"

Rosie hopped up and down. "Oh, yes."

I agreed and went to shuffle through the many gown boxes. I pulled out the gold

sequined one first, then a petal pink dress with two iridescent flowers as the bust, and a silken seafoam gown with a slit up to the thigh.

As I did so, Rosie scrambled to find matching shoes.

Helena brought the golden arm and ear cuffs and placed them next to the first gown. They looked lovely. We were all in agreement.

For the pink dress, Helena suggested a pair of long, dangling earrings crafted from iridescent butterfly wings, each with a little diamond drop. They looked just as otherworldly as the gown. Rosie nodded her approval.

Rosie insisted on an emerald ring and necklace set to match Forrest's eyes. Forget his eyes, how about his frog form? I thought bitterly.

Rosie and Helena made several additional selections, and we were finally done.

As I looked over the ensembles, I noticed how bits of nature were worked into each of the fashions—golden leaves, petals, butterfly wings. This gave rise to a positively wicked idea. "Rosie, would a dress with feathers be fashionable?"

"Yes, very," she said.

"I have a favor to ask then."

She nodded happily. "Of course, mistress."

"Can you ask your finest dressmaker to fashion me a dress for the revel featuring feathers? Something that will take Forrest's breath away."

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She beamed. "Of course, mistress. It would be my pleasure."

"And I'll need some coordinating jewelry as well," I said to Helena.

"I'll work directly with the gown maker."

"Please do."

I couldn't wait to see the look on Forrest's face.

Little sparrow, my foot.

## CHAPTER 25

### The Stolen Bride

Forrest arrived just as I was finishing supper. "Shall we?" he asked.

I raised an eyebrow. "Don't you want to eat first?"

"Not necessary," he said.

I narrowed my eyes and gave him a quick once over. It was hard to say with so many glammers in play, but I often found he looked tired. Maybe he wasn't eating properly.

"I find food very necessary. Take a roll," I wheedled, offering one out to him.

"Are you nagging, dearest?" He grinned.



I crossed my arms over my chest and frowned. "Of course not. Starve for all I care."

He bypassed my offered roll and snatched a dark blue faerie apple from the table and said, "As you wish." He took a sinful bite. The juice dripped down the corners of his mouth, and his tongue flicked out to lick it away.

I caught myself staring and quickly looked down. How could someone look so good eating a blighted apple? I certainly didn't.

He gave me a wicked grin and offered his arm. "Ready, dearest?"

He was enjoying this way too much. I gave a belabored sigh but rose from my seat and accepted his arm, though I hardly needed a formal escort through the hallways of his private wing.

"I believe you wanted to chart our course," he reminded, leading me toward the large oak doors that led to the castle beyond.

At last, I had my chance! I knew exactly where I wanted to go. Hawthorne's book had sparked an idea for how I might locate Briar. Best of all, it didn't involve wandering the dangerous island after dark or asking a single fae for help, not even Forrest. I smiled up at him. "I'd like to see the greenhouses."

He looked pleased at my suggestion. "Why, I expected something far more deadly. You've surprised me again, little sparrow."

"You'll find I can be very surprising," I said, feeling perhaps a touch too confident about my plan.

He narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Hmm, well, it will be pleasant enough to spend an evening where I'm not saving your hide from mortal peril."

"Let's not forget who put my mortal hide in peril to begin with," I grumbled.

"I can hardly be blamed that humans have the lifespan of goldfish."

"Goldfish?" I gasped indignantly. "Is that how you see us?"

"Frankly, yes. At your best, you will live a century. I will live a millennium."

"So, you assume I will die first? How rude. For all we know, you'll be cut down in battle," I declared, pointing a finger at his chest.

"How kind of you to say."

The corner of my lip twitched upward. "We shall see who outlives the other."

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"Well, the isle's air combined with our betrothal bond should extend your minuscule lifespan, assuming you can stop running headlong into danger."

I winked. "No promises."

He grinned down at me.

Oh, my stars. Why had I winked? I was flirting with him! What was the matter with me?

Our conversation quieted as we entered the bustling center of the castle and encountered a growing number of onlookers. There was no ceiling here, and I could look straight up at the evening sky. The moon was only a tiny sliver, and it was waning. That meant there were only two weeks until the full moon revel.

The faerie court was out in full force this evening. There were entertainers—gliding, dancing, juggling, or laughing their way through the crowds. There were also dignitaries with straight backs and serious demeanors. Then the most frightening of them all, royals and politicians with their sly, knowing smiles and calculating lips. I knew them well.

"There are so many fae out tonight," I remarked in a soft voice.

"The new moon brings new beginnings," he said. "It's always busy at this time."

I tried not to let a soft smile flit across my lips. Is that why he wanted to bring me out tonight? Were we one of those new beginnings? Did he hope we were? Did I?

Forrest quieted. Neither of us was foolish enough to air our personal business in front of so many watchful eyes. I supposed that was something we had in common. As royals, we were used to wary, watchful lives of solitude and secrecy. Hyper aware that any casual word or deed could be used against us. But maybe I was giving him too much credit. Maybe he was just entertained by the jugglers.

I had been wise not to wander the castle. Not all of the fae glancing in our direction appeared welcoming. I wondered if taking a human bride was frowned upon or if they simply wanted to kill me. With fae, one could never be certain.

Still, they weren't all bad. Rosie and Harry were nothing like the bloodthirsty, changeable creatures in our dockside stories. Even Forrest, I supposed.

As we neared the castle's exit, a ceiling appeared overhead once more, and the walls were tall and vaulted. Ornate pillars of salt stood on each side, carved to look like waves. They ranged in color from pale aqua to pure white to faded coral. Enormous chandeliers dangled, fracturing light against the sea glass floor.

Despite the grandeur, it was still totally wild. Sea oats grew in clumps along the edges of the hallway, and at one point, when we passed an intersecting hallway, I saw marshland. It seemed the fae couldn't keep nature out, or they simply weren't inclined to do so.

Soon, we reached the main doors and exited the castle.

"What makes you want to visit our greenhouses?" he asked.

I considered my answer for a moment before replying truthfully, "Your plants are legendary in our kingdom. I've seen a few with my own eyes."

"Have you now?"

"Not many. They're very rare," I lamented.

"Our people aren't welcome on your shores. Perhaps, you haven't heard the story of your forebears."

Oh, I had.

Far across the waters lie the old country— a place with dirty, overpopulated cities and sweeping famine. It had been nearly one thousand years since we departed their shores. We were long forgotten now.

Our relationship with the fae had started off badly. We left with one dozen ships, but only three made it past the isle. One with half of its passengers massacred. But I was curious about his version of history. "What do you mean?" I asked.

He snorted. "Your fifteenth great-grandfather trapped and skinned a bear. That bear was my grandfather."

I hadn't realized how closely Forrest was related to the fae bear from our legends. Something that felt like a campfire story to me was tangible to him. I knew the legend, but he knew the man. "I'm sorry," I said in a low voice.

He shrugged. "Don't be. He was a brutal man who sowed discord everywhere he went. During his rule, the fae courts were embroiled in a nearly century-long war. His passing was barely mourned."

For the first time, I realized Forrest wasn't just some ill-tempered immortal god; he was a man. He had family and a past. Had he been forced to fight in those wars? Had he been forced to kill? Had he always held the throne?

Not long after, we reached a series of three massive, domed greenhouses. I looked out

at them and I sighed. "They're beautiful." I quickened my pace, longing to reach their lush interiors.

I heard a low chuckle beside me. "So impatient."

"Well, as you pointed out, I have limited time on this earth. I want to make the most of it."

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"Then, by all means, run if you wish. I'll endeavor to keep up."

"Do you want to race?" I asked, a gleam in my eye. It was the sort of thing my sisters and I would have done.

"You really think you can beat me?" His green eyes, which I usually found so intense, were glittering with laughter.

"Probably not, but we won't know if we don't try," I said. "One... two..." I didn't wait for three. I started running, laughing all the way.

After a moment, I grew suspicious. Why hadn't Forrest passed me yet? Had he refused to join me in this burst of childishness? I stopped running and clutched my side, turning back to look for him. He wasn't there.

I turned in every direction. He was nowhere to be seen. Had he left me out here?

Then I felt a powerful downdraft of air just above me. It reminded me of the owl in the forest, so I turned my head to look up at the night sky. There was Forrest, hovering in the air with his wings aloft. They were as iridescent as a dragonfly's wing and the ever-changing color of the sea.

"Hey," I cried indignantly. "That's cheating!"

He laughed and soared a few feet ahead. "Come on, little sparrow. Unfurl your wings!"

"Cheating fae!" I called.

"Slow human," he teased.

I surged forward, but he quickly soared past me. He stopped to wait for me. When I caught up, he rushed ahead again.

Finally, we reached the open entrance to the greenhouse, and he lowered himself back to the ground and retracted his wings once more.

"Cheater." I hit him playfully on the chest and felt my hand linger over his rapidly beating heart. I smiled up at him.

"Liar," he whispered, his eyes twinkling down at me. Once more, I wondered if he would kiss me. But instead, he lowered his lips to his palm and blew a gust of sea air toward the greenhouse door.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"To take down the wards. You don't think just anyone can walk into our greenhouses, do you?"

I had hoped so. "Of course not."

We entered the greenhouse together, and I stared out at a sea of otherworldly plants. Ones that were only legends on my own shores.

I started to reach out to one, planning to gently stroke its petals.

Forrest reached out and grasped my forearm.



I looked up at him in surprise.

"That plant feeds off blood," he warned. "Here." He took my hand in his. "I better keep hold of this for you. Only until it's safe, of course."

My heart fluttered, and I tried to quiet it. We were just holding hands. We were betrothed. There was no reason to act so silly.

The greenhouses were as spectacular and expansive as I had wished, but no matter how many we strolled through, I did not find the plant I wanted—the one I intended to steal.

That book Hawthorne recommended had awakened something in me. Memories from long, long ago had begun to surface. One more powerful than the others. It was a beautiful, bright day, and I couldn't have been but two years old.

"Come, Georgia," Momma called.

She was a pretty lady with round blue eyes, warm blonde hair streaked with gray, and the beginnings of soft wrinkles at the corners of her lips and eyes from smiling.

I ran to her on the shaky legs of a toddler and happily accepted her hand.

She smiled down at me. "Are you ready for our walk, love?"

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"Bry-aw?" I asked in a sweet chirping voice.

"Briar has gone to her lessons. We'll join her for lunch," my mother replied. "In the meantime, let's enjoy the sunlight. Can you say sunlight?"

I nodded. "Suh."

She smiled indulgently down at me. "That's right. Sunlight." She led us across our sprawling, manicured backyard and closer to the wilds beyond. As I held her hand, the world felt so big, so beautiful, and so full of adventure.

To keep my attention on our walk, she sang one of my favorite tunes.

"Sunlight and water

Earth and air

Talking tulips

Pull at your hair."

She reached down and gently tugged a lock of my hair, and I giggled.

"Rosemary's roots

have taken

Lion's aroarin'

Time for this garden to awaken!"

She raised her voice on the last word, and I tried to mimic her with a little shout of my own. She smiled affectionately down at me.

"A blue fae flower

from those nasty folk

Sing a song and

crack a yolk."

I crinkled my nose at the word "folk."

"Whispers and secrets

soon will be shared.

Did you remember susurrus,

my dear?"

Before we made it beyond the hedge, a gardener stopped momma. I whined and pulled and twisted. She picked me up, but finally let me wriggle free.

At first, I wandered around at her feet, grabbing clumps of grass in my chubby, little fingers and bringing them up to my nose to smell.

But I grew bored with the grownups. I wandered closer to the big hedgerow and stepped into its dense foliage, peeking through the branches at Momma.

Hide and seek.

She didn't seem to notice. So, I pushed my way through to the other side and ran. She'd never catch me!

Soon, I came upon a secret garden, obscured by overgrown white rose bushes and shaded by old oak trees dripping with moss.

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Momma had noticed I was missing now. "Georgia!" she called.

I giggled and pushed through the rose bushes, trying to find a better hiding spot. A thorn caught the sleeve of my dress. I pulled it away and pricked my thumb, drawing a dark red dot of blood. It dripped onto my soft linen dress. Momma would be mad.

"Georgia," she called again in exasperation.

I didn't pay her any attention.

Inside, the garden was filled with blues, greens, and whites—unusual hues. I lay in the center of the garden, hiding among the sky-blue petals, smiling to myself the way only naughty toddlers can. I sucked my bleeding thumb.

That's when I heard the first whisper. "Hello, sweetness."

Everything is pure magic to a toddler. A match to a candle wick is as surely witchcraft as talking flowers, so I said back very proudly, "Hello! I hiding."

A soft chuckle from the flowers. "Just like your mother. Beautiful child."

When my mom found me, I was still chattering away with the flowers which had insisted I call them "Gran."

Momma rolled her eyes and admonished the flowers, "Mother, I've been looking all over."

Then she scooped me up in her arms, and I quickly forgot the whole incident. Like I said, magic is nothing to a toddler.

But now I knew what had happened. At least, I hoped.

My grandmother had been dead long before I was born. Yet, somehow, I had spoken with her. If I could recreate that garden, perhaps I could talk to her again. The dead could see far more than I. Perhaps, she could tell me where to find Briar.

We were exiting the west end of the greenhouse when I saw several small dilapidated buildings in the distance.

"What are those?" I asked, pointing toward them.

"We built new greenhouses several years ago, but the old ones still stand. They'll return to the earth with time."

Sure enough, I saw vines beginning to cover one side.

Maybe the plant I needed would be in the old greenhouse ruins. I'd have to return on my own. Surely, the old structures wouldn't be so heavily warded.

I was snapped out of my scheming by Forrest's question. "Are you looking forward to the upcoming revel?" he asked.

Caught off guard, I frowned. "Not really."

"Because it formalizes our engagement?" he asked. His voice was low, maybe even hesitant.

"That's not it."

He cocked his head to one side. "Then what is it? Do you not like the gowns? I know our fashion is a bit more revealing than what you're accustomed to?"

I shook my head. "I've never really liked balls."

"The crowds?" He guessed. "Or dancing? Perhaps you don't know how to dance?"

I rolled my eyes. "Of course, I know how to dance. I am the eldest remaining daughter of the king. I've been taught and drilled on dances from every kingdom. Except yours, that is. I have no knowledge of fae movements."

He grinned and replied suggestively, "I'd be happy to show you any movement you'd like."

I ignored his obvious double entendre. "I bet you wouldn't feel so confident if the shoe were on the other foot."

"Oh, you think so?" He took me in his arms and pulled me close but not too close. It would narrowly meet propriety in the human world. The near touch of our bodies was electric, and I longed to pull him closer.

He led me around the moss strewn floor, and we were bathed in moonlight. "How am I doing?" he asked in a low whisper just above my ear.

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"Fine," I said, trying to sound bored, nothing like how I actually felt. My heart was racing, and I was practically drunk off his nearness. I longed for more.

He wasn't having it. He gave a wicked grin, pulling me tight against his chest. Wings sprouted from his back, and he lifted me just a touch into the air, spinning us both.

My breath came in a gasp at his neck.

"What about now?" he whispered.

"Cheater," I murmured.

"Liar," he whispered against the curve of my ear.

A shiver trickled down my spine.

"Would you like to go higher?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered madly. Yes, I wanted to fly higher. I wanted to go places I had never gone before. I wanted to dream of things I had never dared. Right now, I wanted to soar through the air in the strong embrace of the Fae King. I wanted to leave the ground and all the limitations I had set for myself far behind. I wasn't just Princess Georgia anymore. I was Georgia—a woman who could fly. The only limits were the ones I set for myself.

He unfurled his beautiful wings. With his arms wrapped tightly around me, we soared upward. I could smell the salty ocean air and feel it against my cheeks.



I cried out in delight.

Soon, we were high enough that I could see the tops of the trees and the dancing lights of the wisps within. Then the marshes and ocean beyond. Moonlight reflected off of the water.

Wrapped securely in his embrace, I nestled my head against his chest and listened to his steady heartbeat. An earthy scent of pine clung to his skin and mingled with an aroma of mist and sea. The pull to him was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It was primal and powerful.

He slowly brought us back down in front of the greenhouse, and my feet brushed the ground once more. We didn't separate right away. Instead, I stared up at him in wonder, adrenaline pumping through my veins. For a moment, I forgot I was human, and he was fae. I forgot he was supposed to be my enemy. I stood on tiptoes and brought my lips to his.

He responded immediately, wrapping his arms tighter around me and returning my impulsive kiss with his own slow, exploratory one. When he parted my lips with his tongue, I let out a small moan of pleasure.

Then the kiss grew wild, hot, and wet. He pressed me against the greenhouse, caging me with his hands. Soon, I forgot everything but him and me. I felt alive, so very alive. It was like that moment right before a storm when electricity sparks the air and raises the little hairs on your arms.

I knew if I didn't slow this down, I would be lying in his sheets come morning. Slowly, regretfully, I pulled back.

"Well," he said carefully. "This seems as good a time as any. I have something for you." He pulled a small box out of his trouser pocket, carved from wood. He popped

it open and displayed a stunning ring, adorned with two glinting pieces of sea glass on each side and a large pearl in the center. I recognized the sea glass that he had given me as an engagement stone.

"How did you get this from my room?"

He smiled. "Rosie and Helena, of course."

"Of course," I echoed, staring at it. For the first time, I felt like the Fae King really wanted to marry me.

"May I?" he asked.

Adrenaline still pumping through my veins, I nodded. "Yes."

He slipped the ring on my finger.

"Now I look like a proper human bride," I said, studying it.

"And a proper fae bride as well," he said, taking in my still panting breath and stroking my flushed cheeks.

## CHAPTER 26

### The Fae King

"She asked for something," announced Rosie.

I grinned a wicked grin. At last. A tip of the hand. She must want something. No one was so selfless. Since I had gone to collect her, she had only asked for things for others—protection for her family and a way to communicate with her younger sister.

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Show me your ugly side, little human, I thought gleefully. Your greed.

"Well, what is it?" I prompted Rosie.

"She asked for gardening implements—a spade, seeds, and wheelbarrow."

I frowned. "You can't be serious?"

I was beginning to believe there was nothing wrong with this human. She wasn't a witch. She wasn't greedy. She wasn't wrathful.

Instead, I couldn't help but find her beautiful with her blonde sun-kissed hair that she rarely tamed, eyes as blue and deep as the ocean, wide hips and round breasts so unlike my own people, and those adorable freckles scattered across her nose.

I wasn't sure I had ever seen someone so lovely. The sharp, ethereal beauty of my own people was nothing compared to her warm strength.

And the way she had felt pressed against my body when we kissed. I had wanted so much more.

It wasn't just her looks. She was honest. She had no trouble putting me in my place when she believed I was wrong. Something I wasn't used to from any woman in my own court who agreed with my every word. Which meant I never knew whether they truly agreed or not.

Georgia was fiercely stubborn—trekking out into the woods day after day with no

escort. Even now, I couldn't help but admire the hard work she was putting into some ill-fated gardening project, her attempt to pull beauty from the earth. Something I never expected from a human.

She had been kind to Rosie and Harry.

It was at that moment that I caught myself. What was I thinking? Physical attraction was one thing, but was it possible I was beginning to have actual feelings for this human woman?

She was supposed to fall for me. Not the other way around.

## CHAPTER 27

### The Stolen Bride

The following morning, I woke early and gathered my courage. I hadn't dared to wander outside on my own since Forrest had saved me from the Unseelie Queen. But today's mission required stealth. I couldn't very well ask Harry to accompany me to the old, dilapidated greenhouses without arousing suspicion.

So, I dressed in a plain linen dress and boots and prepared to make my exit. This time, I wanted daylight on my side. I wasn't foolish enough to wander close to nightfall again. At least, not until I had finished reading Forrest's entire Book of Iron.

I took a few precautions. I wore my dress inside out and carried a pinch of salt. While salt did not bother the fae of the isle, the Book of Iron said it could be a powerful deterrent against migratory or visiting fae.

First, I wanted to stop and see if I could snag an apple or leftover bread for my walk. I thought, if the weather held up, I might stop for a picnic. I found it often rained on

the isle during the afternoon. It's part of what keeps everything so lush and green.

The dining room was empty and the table completely cleared. It was still an hour or so before breakfast, so it wasn't a huge surprise. Off to one side, in another room, I heard a loud bang and shuffling feet. Could this be the door to the kitchen?

Hesitantly, I pushed it open and discovered a magnificent tavern-style kitchen complete with wheels of cheese that were bigger than a sea turtle's back. Pots and pans hung from the ceiling, pristine and gleaming. To my immediate left, I saw a set of ancient stairs descending downward. A wine cellar perhaps?

In the midst of it all were two tiny, stout men frozen in horror. They had ruddy cheeks and whiskers like a cat. I couldn't decide if they were adorable or hideous, but I did recognize their lineage at once. They were brownies, household fae who keep clean and order. As far as most of the folk go, they seemed almost helpful.

But they didn't like to be seen, and if they felt unappreciated, they would leave. Sometimes with a frightful trick in their wake. I wasn't certain how much of that applied to those serving a fae king. Still, I did my best to bumble through the exchange.

"I am so sorry to disturb your work." I gestured around the room. "I've never seen such a well-run household. Why, look how the countertops shine. The king is very lucky to have two such wonderful fae in his service."

One of them stroked his whiskers in a demure sort of way, and the other blushed magnificently. "Very kind, madame. You must be the lady of the house."

I stumbled for a moment. "I, er, yes. I am. Newly so."

They nodded, looking as skittish as cats at bath time. I remembered one more bit of

wisdom from the folks in my own kingdom. Offer milk in a saucer. So I turned my back on them, found a carafe of fresh milk, and poured it into a small, chipped bowl. Without glancing backward, I set it on the floor.

"Many thanks," one purred.

I smiled and turned to leave, but before I could do so, there was a sudden flurry of movement. Then I felt a tap on my back. The brownies were nowhere to be seen, but waiting for me was a cloth-lined basket filled with fresh bread, cheese, and a calf skin of wine.

"Thank you," I said softly, taking its handle and departing the kitchen.

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With my basket in tow, I was ready to go. This time, I intended to walk straight out the front door of the castle and not end up in a maddening, dangerous loop of faerie circles. I set my mind to the task at hand and focused. No daydreaming today, I scolded myself.

I exited the kitchens first, then the private royal wing, before finally entering the main thoroughfare. The hallways were nearly empty compared to my evening stroll with Forrest.

Along my path, I nearly ran into a man with round, molten gold eyes and thick eyelashes.

He stuck out a gentle hand. "Whoa there."

I looked up and gave my first genuine smile of the day. "Hawthorne!"

He returned his own easy smile and bowed. "Well met, princess. Where are you headed on this beautiful day?"

"The greenhouses."

He fell into step beside me.

"And you?" I asked.

"The library."

"An excellent choice."

He grinned. "I thought you'd approve."

"Do you mind if I walk with you?"

I shook my head. "Not at all."

He quickly fell into step beside me and lowered his voice. "I've made inquiries... about your sister."

"What have you learned?" I asked in a rush of breath.

"Not as much as I hoped. Briar's movements are hard to track. I can't tell you where she is, but I can confirm she is alive and well."

Relief flooded me. The fae realm was filled with danger. I had been too afraid to even consider that Briar might not have made it. That she might have died. Something that had almost happened to me twice in just weeks. "You're sure?" I asked.

He nodded. "Certain. I wish I had more to tell you."

I shook my head. "Thank you. That is enough for now. My heart is full knowing she is well. You'll keep asking?"

He gave me a thumbs up. Something I had never seen a fae do before. "Until we get that wedding invitation to her."

I laughed softly. "You're very kind." Then I hesitantly asked a question. I knew I was still talking to a fae, no matter the distant human blood in his veins. "Is there anything I can do for you? Any repayment?"



He lowered his head humbly. "Helping you is helping the court. No further payment is necessary."

I smiled.

We entered a crowded thoroughfare, and he offered his arm out for me to take. "Better not to get separated."

I accepted his arm, and he made polite conversation. "Do you have any hobbies, Princess Georgia?"

This was the sort of conversation I was used to, the sort that filled the ballrooms and salons of my old life. So, I answered easily, "Perhaps, it is strange to admit this to one of your kind, but I enjoy horticulture immensely. Watching plants shoot up from the earth, nurturing them, and marveling in their beauty."

"And utility," he added.

"Sometimes," I agreed.

"Have you had time to read that book I recommended?"

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I frowned. I really should have made time, but I had been distracted by Forrest and shoe salesmen. "A bit. My time has been very limited these last few days."

"Ah, preparations for the revel," he said.

"Yes."

"Save a dance for me?" he asked with that jovial grin.

"Of course."

We reached the front doors, and I paused.

"Would you like me to walk you the rest of the way?" he asked.

"No, thank you. I'm okay on my own."

He inclined his head. "Enjoy your time in the sun."

"Enjoy your time in the library."

Once into the woods, I stepped lightly, trying to make as little noise as possible. I didn't want to attract unfriendly attention this time. Even so early in the day, it was very hot, and I fanned myself. Perhaps, an afternoon shower would knock down this humidity.

My thoughts on the weather were interrupted as I heard a twig snap behind me. My

heart hammered. This was all too familiar. Forrest's words echoed in my ears, "There are no tricks of the light on the isle." Probably no tricks of sound either.

I walked carefully forward a few paces as if I had heard nothing. Then, suddenly, I whipped around to face my would-be-attacker.

I was practically nose to nose with a beautiful stag. The one that helped rescue me from the Unseelie Queen. He wasn't alone either. There were at least seven of them visible, though I suspected more had hidden behind trees or lain in the moss.

I looked at the stag in surprise for a moment. Its big, warm brown eyes stared back. Was this the stag that had saved my life the other night? I reached out my hand to pat his nose.

Then I stopped and retracted it. I shouldn't get attached to this beautiful creature. After all, he had sent him. I was almost certain of it. He was spying on me! I let out a frustrated sigh.

The stag looked at me.

I gazed suspiciously back. "You're going to tell him where I go, aren't you, boy?"

He gave me a baleful look, and I relented and petted him. After all, he was only a pawn.

I couldn't be sure, but I swore I heard a small laugh somewhere in the distance. Was the Fae King out here, too, and if so, why wouldn't he just show himself?

## CHAPTER 28

### The Stolen Bride

I returned from a long day of working in the greenhouses with the sun setting at my back. My muscles ached, and dirt was caked beneath the tips of my fingernails.

When I reached my bedroom, Rosie was waiting with a large glass of water infused with fae berries and herbs. I accepted it gratefully, sucking half of it down in one gulp. "Thank you."

"You know what would do wonders for your sore muscles? The king's private hot springs."

"Hot springs?" I echoed hopefully.

"Oh yes, the royal hot springs are filled with minerals for healing and anti-aging."

I didn't need convincing. A hot soak sounded perfect. Any anti-aging was a delightful bonus. I had seen the fae walking around with their flawless skin and assumed they were all glamoured, but perhaps not. Perhaps, there was something in the water. "How do I get there?" I asked.

"Simply walk toward your bathroom with the intention of the hot springs. The faerie circles will do the rest," Rosie said.

"Should I bring a towel?"

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"No need. You'll find everything you need there," she replied.

I nodded my head. "Thanks, Rosie."

She beamed. "Anything for you and our king."

If I had been paying more attention, I might have noticed a glint in her pink eyes or her nose twitching in excitement.

I followed her instructions and soon found myself swept away to a magnificent place I had never visited before. It was as if I had entered a sea cave—the walls were made of coral, massive shells adorned a sandy floor, and in the center was a massive porcelain pool with bubbling, steaming water.

At my immediate left a free fall of water fell into a large clamshell basin. I supposed I should rinse off before entering the main tub, so I quickly stripped out of my gardening clothes and hopped in. I rubbed my hands together under the water, loosening the dried soil and watching the water turn black. Then I ran my hands along my body, giving myself a quick rinse. I lingered on my sore neck and shoulders, massaging.

I exited but didn't see any towels. No matter. The room was warm enough, and I saw a large pool of water in the center of the room. I made a quick dash for it.

Gentle steam rose from the pool, and little white and pink blossoms floated along the top of the water. I sat on the edge of the pool and slid into the water. The water was perfect, absolute bliss. It was just deep enough that if I stood, the water came just

above my navel, exposing my bare breasts. I could practically feel my worries fading away.

I sank under the water and let it work on my sore neck and shoulders. Then I floated serenely on the top of the water with my eyes closed. Not a worry in the world. This was amazing.

Until I knocked into something warm and hard. My eyes flicked open. Still floating on my back, I looked up into a set of brilliant green eyes, sparkling with mirth. "Hello, little sparrow."

The warm, hard object was Forrest's bare chest. I screamed then pulled my entire body underwater.

Just above me, I could hear him chuckling. "It's a bit too late for that, don't you think? Come back up."

With horror, I realized he was right. How long had I been blissfully floating naked? Minutes. Definitely minutes. He had seen... everything.

I was so embarrassed I could die. I would have to stay underwater forever. I couldn't possibly face him. I would rather drown than see his smug face. Except I really did like breathing. So, regretfully, I surfaced and shrieked, "What are you doing in here?"

His smile grew broader. "I should be asking you that. You see, I was here first. Didn't you see me?"

No, I had been in a state of hot water bliss. The pool was large and curved with alcoves, and the rising steam obscured my view once I was in the water. But mostly, I just hadn't looked. It never occurred to me that someone else might already be here.

He waded toward me, letting his hand trail idly along the edge of the pool. Everywhere his fingertip touched crystalized salt and seashells formed. He was powerful. He was magnificent. He was... looking at me like a cat about to eat a bird.

Finally, he reached me and tipped my chin up to look into his eyes. "Do you see me now?"

I nodded. I could feel my cheeks and chest coloring pink.

Oh, I saw him. Above the water, I could see his hard bare chest. He had some sort of tattoo over his heart, and I longed to reach out and trace it. From there, his abdominal muscles traveled down to his strong, narrowed hips. The skin there looked delicate. I could even see that dip of muscles leading toward his... Oh stars, I was staring.

I was going to kill that rabbit.

"You seem tense," he purred, placing one hand on each side of the tub caging me. "What have you been up to, little sparrow?"

I couldn't think of anything but the proximity of his body to mine. Finally, I mumbled, "Just a bit of gardening."

He leaned forward until his lips were just inches from my ear, and he breathed, "Mm, gardening is such difficult work."

As his warm breath caressed my ear, my breath caught.

And when he whispered, "Would you like a massage?" my traitorous head nodded yes. After all, he had already seen everything there was to see, and the muscle to the left of my neck felt tight and painful.

To my surprise, he lifted his body out of the water and sat bare-assed on the side of the pool. He pulled me gently backward until I stood between his legs. He began to trace his hands from my bare shoulder to my collarbone.

I shivered, imagining where he might run his hands next.

He delicately traced the space between my collarbones, teasingly lowering his fingers until they trailed at the tops of my breasts. I sucked in an audible breath.

He moved his hands back to my neck and massaged in earnest. I moaned softly.



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He let out a low chuckle.

On impulse, I turned to frown at him, forgetting he was completely naked. My mouth was at the height of his naval, and I was greeted by the sudden sight of his bare skin just inches away.

My eyes lowered ever so slightly and widened at his hardness. He gave me a confident smirk and cocked his head, waiting to see what I would do.

Annoyed and drunk on the sight of his warm skin and the heat of the tub, I leaned forward and bit the sensitive flesh just to the right of his hip bone.

When he groaned with pleasure, something ignited in me as well.

I watched him harden before my eyes, and following that same hot, driving need, I reached out and stroked him curiously. I had only touched one other man before. It had been a brief summer fling with a young sailor when I was seventeen and he eighteen. The things we had done had been hidden and hurried. I had never really seen anything. It had felt fast, exhilarating, and maybe a little shameful. I had known we had no future.

But I didn't feel that way now. The man before me, every last inch of him, was to be mine, my husband. And for once, I found I didn't mind, not one bit.

I ran my hand up and down his length hesitantly, and he let me explore for a minute or so.

His pupils were dark as he wrapped his hand around mine. "Not so gentle." He tugged my hand upward again and again, showing me just how he liked to be touched.

I mimicked the motion, and he moaned, leaning back on his hands.

A wicked grin spread across my lips as I lowered my mouth and gave small kitten licks along the top of his shaft.

"Georgia," he groaned.

My name on his lips felt intimate. More than the physical act we were engaging in.

I started to reply in kind but then I paused. Forrest was not his real name. It was what everyone called him, and the fae did not give out their true names so easily. If everyone knew him as Forrest, he was not Forrest.

I froze.

Suddenly everything felt wrong. The water was too hot. The air was stuffy. My head felt fuzzy, and my pulse was erratic. I needed to get out of here.

What had I been thinking? This was no fairy tale romance. I was a stolen bride who didn't even know her own betrothed's name.

## CHAPTER 29

### The Fae King

As I said her name, she looked up in my eyes with what I believed, what I hoped, was longing. Did I dare hope for affection too?

But then I watched as the light flickered out of her eyes. She looked ready to bolt as she asked, "Isn't it customary to tell your bride your true name?"

Just like that, romance ended as abruptly as it had begun. I groaned and slid back into the water, hiding all signs of my body's continued response to her naked form—warm, curved, and so very nearly ready for the next step.

I wanted to give her my name, but everything between us was complicated. Yes, we were betrothed, but I had brought her here as my enemy. Her mother had cursed me. A secret she did not yet know. One among many, including the fate of her own sister.

Maybe it was beneath me, but I snapped. "Isn't it customary for a bride to love her groom? Do you love me, little sparrow?"

She paused, an indecipherable series of emotions flickering across her face.

"It's not fair that you can lie," I said.

"It's not fair that you can omit," she replied.

"You're right." I was omitting so very many things.

"Maybe-maybe we should say goodnight," she faltered.

"Maybe," I said, trailing a longing hand down her cheek.

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As she walked away, I was dying to stop her, to tell her everything. I wanted to make her mine. Now, breaking the curse was just a convenient bonus.

What had come over me?

There was no more denying it. I was falling for this human.

And the landing was going to be hell.

### CHAPTER 30

#### The Stolen Bride

I lay in bed that night, and I thought how close I had come to giving myself over completely to the Fae King, to a man whose name I didn't even know.

Worse still, I feared if I didn't guard it, I would give him my heart too.

I spent the entire day in the gardens. Harry had to collect me as it was growing dark outside. I wondered why Forrest hadn't come himself.

But the truth was I knew.

He might like me. He might find me attractive. He might even want to marry me, but he didn't want to be honest with me. He had secrets he wasn't willing to part with. At least, not yet.

It was the morning of the Full Moon Revel celebrating my engagement to the King of the Island, and my stomach was twisted in knots. Only a few days had passed, but Forrest and I hadn't spoken since that evening at the hot springs.

Visitors had been arriving in throngs, and the castle halls were so full I dared not maintain my ordinary gardening and library routine. Harry had warned me against it at breakfast.

So, instead I sat at the dining room table, reading Forrest's Book of Iron. I hoped there might be some section on faerie revels.

Rosie, who had become very adept at reading my moods, nudged a cup of tea into my hand. "Tea for you, mistress. It's calming. Helps with stomach flutters too."

I accepted the cup and took a small tentative sip. The tea was soothing and sweet with a hint of spice. "It's good. What's in it?"

"I made it myself. It's a blend of chamomile, ginger, lemon, honey, and a few fae herbs."

"Thank you, Rosie."

"It's no trouble, mistress." She hung her head and thumped one of her big back feet nervously. "I'm sorry about the hot springs. I shouldn't have pushed you."

I frowned down at her. "No, you shouldn't have."

"I thought if you could both let your guard down... but it was wrong of me." Her little pink nose twitched, and my heart thawed.

"It's okay. Just don't do it again."

She nodded and hopped away, leaving me to my tea and book.

An hour later, when I was on my second cup of tea, someone knocked on the doors to the royal wing. I didn't get up. They weren't really my doors to open, and I doubted anyone could enter without permission.

Within seconds, the knocking turned to pounding. I looked up and saw a harried Harry hurrying to open the doors. I gave him a small, encouraging smile before returning to my reading.

An exchange of angry, muffled words broke out which turned to raised voices.

I sighed and pushed back my chair to see what the disturbance was.

When I poked my head into the entry, I saw Harry was holding the oak doors shut with the full weight of his shoulder. Just in case. Meanwhile, whoever was on the other side was not happy.

I frowned. Through a crack several inches wide, I could see several fae gathered. "We must see the king at once!"

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Harry said with agitation. It wasn't at all his usual kind, patient demeanor.

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"We demand redress. Our grievances will not be ignored. It is the role of the king to determine territorial disputes."

"I understand, and he shall. But right now, he is otherwise engaged."

"We must return to our lodging before the tide rises. It has to be now."

"Please come again tomorrow." Harry tried to gently shut the door, but a large brown boot was shoved through. A moment later a sharp dagger stabbed low through the crack.

I gasped and raised a hand to my mouth.

Gracefully, Harry dodged the blow. As he did so, the door opened just an inch wider. Harry drew his sword. "Not another move, or I'll run you through."

I sighed. All of this violence so a lazy, good-for-nothing king could sleep in or whatever it was he did. I'd finally had enough. I didn't care to watch a bloodbath unfold before me. "Oh, this is ludicrous! Everyone stop right now. I will wake the king. Sheath your weapons."

A face poked up to the crack, and I saw one very large eye. "Thank you, lady."

"No," said Harry urgently. I could tell he wanted to move to stop me. But even this moment of hesitancy caused the door to open another fraction.

I ignored him and swept across the hall to Forrest's chamber. Ready to finally take

out the anger and uncertainty that has been percolating within me since the hot springs. Without bothering to knock or announce myself, I shoved my way right through his bedroom doors. Rosie was right about one thing; our betrothal bond allowed me easy entry.

The inside of his room was shocking. There were piles of clothes on the floor, a plate of half-eaten food on his dressing table, and upturned wine goblets everywhere. The floor had accumulated sand and black mildew in the corners as if he had been calling in the ocean tide.

No one cleaned in here I realized. Why didn't the brownies come in? Why didn't the palace staff? What exactly was I looking at?

My eyes roved over to his palatial bed. Its black silk sheets were tossed haphazardly, trailing along the grimy floor. The corners of his duvet appeared damp in places from the tide. But most remarkable of all, there, in the center of the bed, sat a large bullfrog with sharp green eyes.

The king.

I recognized his form from the day he tricked me into our bargain. It did not endear me to his situation. "Get out of bed at once. Change your form, and go help your people. They're likely to break through the doors at any moment. Harry had to draw his sword."

He stared back at me. His green eyes were wide and, unexpectedly, frightened.

Why did he look so shocked? Sure the room was disgusting, but it wasn't something a five-man team of brownies and a good, week-long deep clean couldn't fix.

"What's the matter?" I pressed. "Get going."



"I can't." They were the most miserable, defeated words I had ever heard.

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you mean you can't?"

He sighed, his whole tiny green body heaving with the effort of his ennui. "I can't change my form. I can't help Harry."

There were so many questions I wanted to ask. So many things I wanted to say, but I held them back. I needed to help Harry in the entry before things grew violent. "Wait here," I told Forrest.

I left his room and returned to the crowded entry doors, the ones Harry was barely keeping shut.

When Harry glanced up at me, his look told me everything. He was panicked, not about the men threatening to run him through with swords, but about Forrest.

Whatever was going on with the king, Harry knew. I frowned at him, apparently another member of the cabal of secret keepers around here.

Then I turned my attention toward the fae trying to push their way through the door. "The king is unable to meet with visitors," I said primly.

One of the fae looked angry now. "But you just said, you'd get him. Is he unwell? Maybe we should just—" With collective force, they finally pushed their way through the door, sending Harry flying.

I quickly stepped in their path. "I assure you he is quite well enough to call down lightning. Continue forward if you wish to become a smudge on the palace floor."

They paused for a moment, and I quickly took charge of the situation. I had seen my

father do this a dozen times, and it was easy to mimic him. I locked eyes with the men and held up a lazy hand. "However, by his solemn order, Harry is authorized to make this decision on his behalf. His ruling will be final." I looked at them sternly, trying to radiate as much power as I could muster. I was fairly certain I looked less powerful and more like my governess, chastising me for not practicing my needlepoint. But it seemed to work nonetheless.

"Yes, queen." They began to retreat to the hall.

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Queen? The words hit me hard. I wasn't a queen, but I would be soon. How long after the revel would the wedding follow?

Harry exited with the crowd, casting one last concerned glance at me.

I stomped back to the king's bedroom.

As instructed, he hadn't moved. He looked up at me, blinking those helpless green frog eyes of his.

I met his soft gaze with the intensity of the sun's burning rays. "Now are you finally going to tell me what in the twelve kingdoms is going on here?"

Forrest, the bullfrog, stared up at me and sighed deeply. It was strange, watching a bullfrog do something so human.

## CHAPTER 31

### The Fae King

I could hardly believe my own ears.

Out in the entryway, my human bride was defending me ferociously. She was lying for me. Even after everything that had transpired between us in the hot springs, she was still willing to protect me. Even after all my secrets, deceptions, and omissions. Somehow this tentative thing between us, hot and passionate, but so fragile wasn't yet broken.

Unfortunately, our power dynamic had just taken a massive swing. Georgia could leverage this knowledge to get anything she wanted from me, and she was smart enough to know it.

Several minutes later, she returned and latched the door shut behind her. She placed one hand on her hip and stared down at me.

Oh, horror upon horrors. My moment of doom was upon me. Now that she knew my secret, what would she do?

With her hands on her hips and fire in her eyes, she demanded, "Now are you finally going to tell me what in the twelve kingdoms is going on here? Why did you make me turn those men away? Why are you"—she paused and gestured at my amphibian form with disgust—"like this?"

I let out an involuntary "ribbit." How mortifying. "Are they gone?" I asked.

"Yes," she confirmed. "I told them you would turn them into a smudge on the castle floors if they didn't depart at once. I also told them Harry would resolve their land dispute. Hope you don't mind."

Of course, I had heard everything. Not only my ears were sharp. My hearing was twice as good as a human's. I tried to keep things light, chuckling at her words. Unfortunately, it came out as another anxious "ribbit." "You really said smudge?" I asked.

She jutted her chin upward. "I did. But I think we have bigger issues at hand."

Still, I didn't speak. What should I say? What did she suspect?

She stared at me for a long moment, appraisingly. "You're stuck in this form, aren't

you?"

Slowly, I nodded.

"For how long?" she asked.

I felt my small frog body sag. "Years," I admitted.

"But I've seen you as a man." Her cheeks flushed for a moment, and I knew she was thinking of our time in the hot springs. She had seen all of me.

"I am cursed by day. At sunfall, I return to my true form."

She cocked her head to the side as if concentrating on a very difficult math problem. "I'm not sure I understand. I thought shapeshifting was common among fae. Rosie takes on a rabbit form, does she not? The selkies become seals."

I shook my head. "It's not the same. The changes are painful, and I can't control them. This form is far too weak. I am a king who could be defeated by a rival's boot. I have limited use of my magic in this form. Flying a letter to you on the breeze is about all I can do. So, I am forced to hide and make excuses. I risk offending diplomats by neglecting their visits. I scarcely ever travel outside of the island. I delegate all morning appointments, even important ones."

She sat down on the edge of my bed and ran a finger down my back. Was she petting me? She did it once more, and I was sure. My human bride was trying to comfort me.

I felt my heart swell with emotion. This outcome had never once occurred to me. I had imagined countless scenarios over the years. If someone found out, I thought they might toss me against a wall, squash me with their book, capture me in a terrarium, or even fry me up for lunch. I thought they might use my secret to force me to relinquish

my crown or wage war on neighboring courts.

Never in a thousand years had I expected someone to just sit with me in my grief and be my friend.

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"That sounds difficult," she hummed.

She had earned my trust. It was time for me to earn hers.

I took a deep breath, preparing to spill all my secrets. Then I stopped short. Shouldn't I give her a little time first? For all I knew, she would run out of the room and tell the first person she met.

"I need to rest. Can we talk tonight just after sunfall, before the ball?"

She gave me a knowing glance. "You promise you won't run away from this conversation?"

"I'll be there."

To my astonishment, she placed a soft kiss atop my green, slimy head. "I'll see you tonight, Forrest."

Just after sunfall, I washed and dressed quickly for the Full Moon Revel and then paced, waiting for Georgia's arrival.

I had invited her to meet me in my rooms, disgusting though they were. What I needed to say was too dangerous to whisper on the terrace. It was time to tell Georgia what was really at stake here. It was time to be honest.

After all, more than one kingdom hung in the balance.

And maybe more than one heart too.

Harry had brought in some wine and food to nibble on. Though I could tell his teeth were on edge the entire time.

"What if she tells someone?" he asked.

"What if she doesn't?" I replied. The smallest glimmer of hope had lodged itself in my chest, and I feared I would never be able to remove it.

Harry stared back at me in shock. "I've never seen you like this."

I met his gaze. "I've never seen anyone like her."

Harry clapped a hand on my shoulder. "I can see you've already lost your heart. Just be careful not to lose your head. She's only just found out, and this secret could bury us all."

I ran a nervous hand through my still-damp hair. "I know. I dragged you into all of this, and for that, I'll always be regretful. How is your iron heart, Harry?" I asked.

He gave a far away, almost wistful look. "Heavy, but it's not your fault. It wasn't even your bargain."

"Still, I should have said something else. Something more."

There was a knock on the door, and I looked pointedly at Harry.

He rolled his eyes. "Goodnight."

I opened the door, feeling nervous. I scarcely stopped myself from fiddling with my



tunic sleeves like some sort of school boy. "Georgia," I said, gesturing for her to come inside.

I led her over to a small settee and side table with a cheese tray and two goblets of wine. I offered a glass to her.

She accepted it. "What's this for?"

"You may want it," I warned.

At the solemnity of my tone, she took a large swig from her wine glass, to fortify her nerves I supposed.

"Okay, I'm ready," she said. "Tell me everything."

"Don't you want a bite to eat first?" I asked.

She bit her lip. "Truthfully, I don't think I could keep it down."

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"I understand. You want me to tell you everything. That's a pretty tall order."

Her lips quirked into a smile. "Well, you're a tall man. I'm sure you'll say what matters."

What matters. I chewed the inside of my cheek. Us. We mattered, or, at least, we should. We should have the opportunity to get to know each other as slowly as we wanted. I thought of the hot spring, or as quickly as we wanted...

Either way, it should be in our own time or not at all.

But I was a king, and she was a princess. We didn't have the luxury of just thinking of ourselves. We each had a duty to our people. All of whom were in danger.

So, I humbled myself and got to the point. "My crown is at stake."

To my surprise, she didn't gasp or look particularly taken aback by my revelation. Perhaps, it was her own royal training kicking in. Instead, she asked, "From who? Is there a particular individual or order?"

"Right now, the island is governed by my court, the seelie. We have reigned for over a century, but it hasn't always been that way. They unseelie have ruled before, and they wish to rule again. They are already preparing to make their move."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Your encounter with the Unseelie Queen was no chance meeting. I'm almost certain

of it. And there have been disappearances too. Servants of important council members. People who might have information. They are seeking my weakness."

She lifted her chin in sharp defiance. "And they won't find it. At least, not from me."

I hadn't even told her that her own kingdom was in danger. This show of loyalty was for me alone. "My fierce little sparrow. Will you peck at my enemies?" I reached out and caressed her cheek. "I'm afraid there's more. They won't stop at the isle, they'll take your kingdom too. They have no tolerance for humans. They will send storms—bigger and more terrible than any you have ever seen. They will batter your shores until there is nothing left. No homes, no crops, no survivors."

She shuddered, and for just a moment, I imagined what she must have looked like as a little girl, sitting in her bedroom window watching the storms come over the ocean.

"Hopefully, it won't come to that. We just have to be better—smarter, quicker, stronger."

She stiffened her back and sat at attention. "How can I help?"

I gazed into her round, willing eyes, and the words dripped from my lips like honey. "Marry me."

She frowned. "But we're already bound to be married."

"Yes, you are bound. Unwillingly. I'm beginning to doubt that will be enough."

She cocked her head to the side. "Enough for who? And what does our marriage have to do with any of this?"

I hung my head. "Our marriage is the only thing left that might break this curse."

She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned deeply. "Why would our marriage break your curse? What aren't you telling me?"

I paused for a moment.

There was so much I wanted to say. There was so much I couldn't say. A single wrong word, and everything we had built could come crumbling down. There were so many secrets between us, but not all of them were my own. There was one that could destroy her. One that I could not speak. No matter how much I might wish to do so. I was bound through magic not to do so.

A part of me was thankful I couldn't. I didn't want to be the person to do that to her. I didn't want to see the hurt flash across her face or the tears stream down her cheeks. I wanted her to be happy. I wanted us to be happy.

Maybe that made me selfish.

Maybe that made me a coward.

I opened my lips and said the simplest truth I could. "I was cursed by a member of your bloodline."

"My what?" she sputtered. "That can't be true. Witchcraft is forbidden throughout the twelve kingdoms."

"Nonetheless, it's true. When I first brought you here, I thought you were a witch too. I hoped you might simply lift the curse willingly."

"I am not a witch!" she cried.

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My heart sank. Empirically, I knew. Of course, I knew. All of the evidence had said as much—she had agreed to my bargain, allowed herself to be dragged here, nearly drowned, and nearly been enslaved by the Unseelie Queen. She was no witch. Even if her mother had been one.

I vividly remembered the day I met her mother, Queen Belinda.

I had been out on my personal terrace taking breakfast when the glass doors flew open. An angry middle-aged woman with dark blonde hair stormed through with Harry on her heels. "How dare you!" she shrieked.

I looked up from my glass of orange juice and my morning political briefs to meet the woman's icy glare. Her crystal blue eyes were red and swollen, rimmed with tears, and her hands shook with rage.

I didn't move or speak right away. Human emotions were so volatile, so close to the surface, so... explosive. I had seen that in battles over the centuries. So, slowly, I set my papers down and said coldly, "I am not the overseer of bargains. If you made a poor one, I cannot correct it for you."

She let out an anguished cry as if she would be ripped in half by her grief, and I winced.

"For what it is worth, I am sorry," I told her. I cannot lie, so my words should comfort her.

"You will be," she muttered, rifling through her knapsack.

I incline my head toward her. "Excuse me?"

She held aloft a talisman and began to chant in a low, ominous tone.

I groaned. What more could I say? Would I have to remove this mad woman from the castle?

Then I felt the shadows creeping up from the floorboards. I felt the temperature drop in the room. This was dark, powerful magic.

I took several hurried steps backward.

But it was too late.

Something unnatural, something otherworldly wrapped its tendrils around my sternum, squeezing and bruising.

Then the air began to leave my lungs.

"Wait," I rasped.

"Too late," she said. "You cannot bring back what is already gone. You will take the form you truly deserve."

Suddenly the terrible squeezing was over, and I couldn't breathe again. I opened my eyes, but everything was wrong. The table was the size of a house. And what was that ahead? An oversized shoe?

I followed the shoe upward to a leg.

That's when I realized. The room was not larger. I was smaller.

I struggled to move to the nearby standing mirror. I... hopped.

In the reflection, my suspicions were confirmed. A large bullfrog stared back at me. A frantic rabbit escaped my lips. Then a stream of swear words.

The woman cackled. "As you and all of your kind deserve. I only wish your suffering would be half my own."

Those words lingered hauntingly on the air. It was only later I understood them and what she had lost that had driven her to this moment.

She hissed at me, "Perhaps, one day, you will find true love. Then you will understand."

"What did you lose? Maybe I can help."

"More than you could ever imagine, cold-hearted king."

I watched helplessly as she strode toward the doors to exit. Then she saw Harry standing there in shock, and she turned on him next. "For serving a master like him and impeding my path, you must be just as terrible. Just as cruel." She clutched at this tunic right above his heart, and the fabric turned to ash.

Harry fell to his knees in pain, and I cried out. "No! Leave him out of this."

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"If only your people had shown me such courtesy."

"Please," I begged, hating the sound of my own desperation. "Please. Don't do this."

She turned slowly to look down at me. "You can break your curse, but I doubt someone like you ever will."

And that was how she left us.

I never saw her again.

She died days later—from a fever or broken heart, I was never sure which.

I was pulled from the old memories by Georgia's insistent voice, "Forrest," she snapped. "Can't you consult another witch?"

"I've consulted scores already. They say my best chance is to have someone of the bloodline lift the curse or to marry within the bloodline."

"Then we must marry," she said simply.

I studied her face, trying to get a read on her. Was she angry? Was she upset? I could tell she wasn't happy. "I'm sorry," I said.

She was rigid, icy, and beautiful. For the first time since I had known her, she reminded me of my own people.



Finally, she said in a clipped tone, "I always knew I would marry for my kingdom and that I would have little say in the matter."

I reached out to grasp her hands, but she placed them in her lap.

"You will always have a say with me," I insisted.

"How can I? My kingdom stands in the balance. We must marry."

I had called her little sparrow since I had first met her, a joke because she had seemed so caged in the human world. I had longed to see her spread her wings and fly, to be the beautiful, wild thing I knew she was. Now, I was the one clipping her wings.

I felt sick.

After a long pause, I said, "I'm sorry. I thought we... well, it doesn't matter what I thought... If you do not desire me, then I ask you only to go through the motions of a formal courtship and marriage ceremony. That may be enough to end this curse once and for all."

She bit her lip, listening to my proposal in earnest this time.

"At my full power, I can protect both of our kingdoms, and you can return home... if you wish."

I wouldn't mind if you stayed, I thought hopelessly.

"I will do as you ask, but only if you grant me one boon," she said formally.

Her words stung. "Georgia, you don't need a bargain to ask me for a favor. I would gladly grant you nearly anything."

She put her hands on her hips. "And you do not need a bargain to force my hand in marriage, but here we are."

I sighed and nodded in acknowledgment. "And your request?"

"I want to see my sister."

My anxiety spiked. The one thing I could not do was take her to her older sister. It would be my ruin. So, I said, "I prefer to leave the past in the past."

She let out a soft growl, but then schooled her features back to that icy sheet of neutral. "I am speaking of my younger sister. Her sixteenth birthday is next weekend."

"And if I do this, you will walk through all of the formal wedding related events and act the part?" I asked. I didn't want to press, but I had to. This was a bargain. It was soul binding. I couldn't take it lightly even if I wanted to pull down the moon and stars and hand them to her.

She nodded tersely. "You have my word."

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"Then yes, I will take you to see your sister." I engulfed her small, warm hand in my own, sealing our agreement. I felt the usual exhilarating pull of a bargain, but this time it felt strangely hollow.

### CHAPTER 32

#### The Stolen Bride

I was a maelstrom of swirling emotions. I was relieved to know the Fae King's secret. I was worried about my family and kingdom. I was aware of my own personal safety in a castle where disappearances were happening.

Mostly I wondered what this meant for us. I understood why Forrest had kept this secret from me. It was deadly. It had the power to topple kingdoms and destroy lives. By sharing it with me, he was burdening me with the knowledge of what hung in the balance.

But I also couldn't help but wonder... Was his unbroken curse the only reason I was still here? Had it weighed on his mind when he decided to save me, stroll with me, send letters to me, and kiss me? And what about what had happened in the hot springs? Had that just been a delightful bonus for him? Did he care about me or just my usefulness as a potential curse breaker?

If the curse was lifted today, would he still want me? A foolish human with the lifespan of a goldfish. I couldn't help but feel a little betrayed.

Still, what if he freed me from our bargain right now? What would I want? Would I

go home? I wasn't sure.

I shook away these thoughts. I simply didn't have time for them.

The one thing I was always sure of was my duty. Whether it was pleasure or pain, I would marry Forrest and become his queen. I would try my hardest to break his curse regardless of the toll on me. I would do it because it would make my family and my kingdom safer. And that was what I had been born to do.

There was one hour until our departure for the Full Moon Revel, and I hadn't yet dressed. The gown I had commissioned was waiting on my bed—white with threads of silver moonlight embroidered in, a semi-sheer bodice, a flowing skirt, and soft white feathers adorning the low, sweetheart neckline. It reminded me of an ethereal bird.

I'd commissioned the dress for him. I'd imagined his green eyes filled with mirth when he saw his "little sparrow" in a gown adorned with feathers. I had imagined us laughing together as he pulled me into his arms to dance like we had on our date. I had imagined us happy.

But right now, I didn't feel happy.

It was a beautiful dress. Perhaps, the most beautiful dress I had ever set eyes on. But I couldn't wear it, not tonight. Not after everything I had learned.

Instead, Rosie helped me into the sleeveless petal pink gown with the flower-petal shaped bodice in iridescent lavender and pale greens. I wore matching petal green high heels, glamoured for comfort. It was a pretty spring night. This dress would be nice.

But not perfect.

Forrest led me down hallways and through doors until we arrived at the castle's largest courtyard. It was an expansive garden with a large open center, surrounded by marble pillars and open to the sky. The scent of blooming night jasmine drifted on the warm breeze.

The moon was magnificent and full, casting its glow down on the scores of partygoers. There were fae of every kind here—royals, wee folk, will-o'-the-wisps, redcaps, wind sprites, dryads, and others I couldn't name. All here to celebrate my false union with the Fae King.

Forrest grasped my hand and pulled me into the center of the faerie circle. Every head in the courtyard turned, and every set of eyes was on us. All conversation stopped. Even the wisps floated serenely above us, glowing in a current of blues and greens like the tide. I quickly forced my eyes downward, lest I be entranced by the sneaky little blighters.

Forrest raised our joined hands in triumph. "Friends! Welcome! I am honored by your presence as is my beautiful bride to be. You know I am not one for elegant speeches. Instead, I say eat well, drink well, and love well!" On the last two words the crowd shouted along, and suffice it to say, the word they used was not love. Forrest snickered at my scandalized facial expression.

Then he swept me into his arms and dipped me into a dramatic kiss. I was caught off guard by his sudden proximity, drawn in by his heady scent of pine, mist, and sea, overwhelmed by his kiss. His tongue parted my lips, searching, and I couldn't help but react to his longing. My mouth opened, welcoming him in. He pulled back a minute later.

"Let the revel commence!" called Forrest.

And so it did.

The crowd cheered, clapped, and stomped. This was nothing like the quiet, dignified gatherings of my own kingdom. This was raucous, and it had only just begun. What would it look like when the fae had begun imbibing?

"Are you ready?" he whispered. "Hold on tight, and I'll make sure you don't get lost to the dance. Unless you want to, of course."

I had heard tales of humans who joined the faerie circles and danced until their feet bled, until they collapsed of exhaustion, or until they died.

I gave him a thin-lipped smile. "Yes, dearest."

He narrowed his eyes ever so slightly. "Is something wrong?"

I didn't reply. There were too many people watching, and this was above all a performance. The king didn't disappoint them. He reached his arms around my waist and pulled me close. We twirled and spun. It was only moments before others joined us. The wee folk joined hands and formed a dancing ring around the perimeter.

After some time, we paused and made our rounds with Forrest introducing me to important guests here and there—several members of his advisory council, a redcap captain of the guard, the radiant queen of the sun court, and more.

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Now this felt like home, boring political conversations and social introductions. At my first opportunity, I excused myself to seek refreshments. I spotted an attendant passing around a tray of bright blue and green cordials. The green was pretty and deep. Unthinkingly, I started to reach for it, but someone knocked my hand away.

Surprised, I turned and saw a young woman close to my own age. She let out a peel of laughter. "I'm sorry. That was so rude of me! Trust me when I say you do not want to drink that one. It's not good for us."

Us? I wondered.

Then, the woman tucked a strand of her bright, copper hair behind her ear, revealing its roundness. She was human, like me. The first I had seen. Was she a stolen bride too? My mouth opened to ask, but she was already slipping back into the crowd.

I took a blue cordial instead. Blue was better anyway. It didn't remind me of a certain someone's traitorous green eyes.

I returned to Forrest's side, and he excused himself to dance.

He pulled me tight against his chest, and I could feel his steady heart beat. I wanted to rest my ear against it and listen. Then I caught myself. Get a grip!

"Careful. Those are strong," Forrest warned, taking the glass from my hand and passing it off to some blur of a fae. Probably a brownie that didn't wish to be seen.

"I'm not a child," I grumbled.

He laughed softly. "Of course not. Drink as many as you want. It would be my pleasure to carry you to bed," he said in a low, rumbling voice that sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

As we danced, I "accidentally" stepped on his toe.

I'd marry him for my family and kingdom, but I wasn't going to flirt. Not now that I knew what I was to him. A solution to a problem.

When Forrest suggested we take a break, I nodded my agreement, but my feet had other plans. They didn't follow. My eyes widened in a brief moment of fear, but Forrest seemed unsurprised. He simply wrapped an arm around my back and pushed me forward.

"Don't worry," he whispered. "I will pull you from the dance anytime you need me, and all of your shoes have a soft-sole charm to protect your feet."

We exited the faerie circle, and my feet returned to normal.

Seconds later, Forrest received a tap on the shoulder from a visiting dignitary, one so wild he almost looked as if he might grow roots into the castle floor. He was a slow talker, and I fought a sigh.

Forrest gave me a brief look that said, "Go on. Have a drink. I'll still be here."

So, I strolled on my own for a bit, taking in the unusual plant life. It struck me that the plant I had been seeking could be here. If I could find susurrus, my garden would be complete.

Yet another attendant passed by with drinks. I stopped and grabbed another blue cordial. This one was a deeper blue than the first and tasted as sweet as nectar. I



hoped it was safe. I looked around for the copper-haired girl, wondering if she could tell me, but sadly, she was nowhere to be seen.

I returned to Forrest's side and offered him the rest of my cordial. He downed it in one shot. "Thanks," he mumbled. "It felt like that conversation would never end."

Then I noticed a hulking fae man approaching us. Though he didn't appear aged, his hair was the color of snow, and his eyes were a sharp, penetrating crystal blue. He was sizing up the room as if he were on a battlefield. He was formidable in stance, build, and attire. His broad shoulders were adorned in battle leathers rather than party finery. A broadsword hung from his hip, and as I looked closer, I noticed it was dripping fresh blood. Had this man just stepped off a battlefield? Had he slain a party guest?

He made me nervous, and I began tracking his steps toward us with trepidation. Until I saw his companion—the petite human woman with vivid, copper hair, the one who had advised me on cordials. I wondered again if she, too, was a stolen bride.

Then I caught sight of her hands. One of them was delicately intertwined with his. Seconds later, the girl tripped, and the man steadied her. She looked up at him with a sheepish smile and loving eyes. Was she glamoured or drugged?

Perhaps not as he gazed back at her steadily for a long moment before righting her.

They appeared to be...together.

But so did Forrest and I.

Appearances were not always reality, and I didn't want to judge someone else's situation before I knew them. And I longed to know this other human girl. She was the first I had seen since arriving in the fae realm.

Luckily, I didn't have to wait long.

The odd couple appeared before us. The fae man bowed his head in deference. The girl's eyes met mine, and she gave me a bemused smile before curtsying. "Oh, it's you!" she said happily.

The fae man cut his eyes over at her warningly.

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Forrest looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

"We met by the drinks. She advised me not to drink the green cordials."

Forrest's brow furrowed. "What's wrong with them?"

The girl laughed and nudged me. "Let's just say it's a secret between us mortals."

Forrest laughed in return. "Very well. Keep your secrets." He turned his attention to the man. "Ivan! It's good of you to come. I know you have... other concerns at present. How are things?"

Ivan nodded solemnly. "The nightmares are spreading, and the barrier is weakening. We don't have long now. I know this is your celebration, but I have a favor to ask of you."

What was all this about nightmares and barriers? It sounded ghastly and frightening, and I found myself hoping this white-haired fae was from a very distant realm.

The girl turned to me. "Would you like to take a turn about the yard? I haven't seen another human in months."

Forrest nodded in relief, and I left with the copper-haired girl.

"I'm Georgia," I offered.

"Clara," she said.

I smiled at her. "It's good to meet you. I haven't seen another human since I got here. Only a few with a human parent or grandparent."

She gave a sad smile. "We don't see many of those in the frosted forests. The nightmares are too close now. Anyone with sense has fled."

"Nightmares?" I asked, puzzled.

She waved away my concern. "Don't worry about it. They're far away from your realm, and this is a party! Your party. We should try to have a good time."

I was still curious, but I didn't pry. After all, we had only just met.

"Then tell me about all the drinks. Which ones are good? And what does the green one actually do?"

She laughed and whispered something in my ear.

"No way!" I cried.

"Seriously," she said.

"Thank goodness you stopped me."

"Anytime."

I glanced back at the men, talking seriously with furrowed brows and low voices.

"This is probably rude of me to ask, but are you two together?"

A sliver of a smile brightened her lips. "It's still new."

"And you?" she asked.

"It's... complicated," I answered after a long pause. "I came as a stolen bride, a princess from another kingdom."

She lowered her voice, "Are you okay?"

I nodded. "I am. This is where I need to be right now."

The girl nodded. "I know how that feels. Sometimes you have to be somewhere even when it's not easy."

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"Like your nightmares?" I asked.

She nodded. "And like your marriage?"

"He's not a bad man," I confided.

Her body trembled, and her eyes darted anxiously from side to side. Then she seemed to shake herself. "I-I didn't think so. Not really. I've known some bad men."

I glanced back over at Forrest and the white-haired fae.

"Oh, no! Not him. I know how he looks, but he's one of the good ones, I swear."

I was still studying them as Liliana, Queen of the Sun Court, joined them.

"That's good," Clara muttered, watching the odd group as well. She turned her attention back to me. "Want to go sample some cordials?"

I nodded. "Absolutely. Food, too."

Clara linked her arm through mine, and we began to drink hop around the courtyard. I stopped several times to peer through dense foliage or study a promising plant. So far, no signs of my missing susurrus, the final plant I needed to complete my garden.

As we walked, Clara began to link a daisy chain. "Are you an herbalist?"

I fought a blush. "Just a gardener," I replied, realizing how bizarre I must appear,

staring at flowers and poking around shrubberies. "Can you keep a secret?"

She mimed stitching her lips.

"I'm looking for something. A rare, blue flower. Back home we call it susurrus."

"I'll let you know if I see it," she promised.

I was three cordials in now—blue, purple, yellow— and I was beginning to feel their effects. Each was different. Blue lowered inhibitions and made your tongue feel like lead. Yellow made you feel warm and energized. The purple one made me spend the next ten minutes blinking at the wisps glowing lights and gorging myself on apples.

"The yellow ones are my favorite." Clara giggled, plopping on the grass and looping her daisy chain into a crown.

"They should be! You had three of them!" I beamed, apple juice running down the sides of my face.

I would have been worried about appearances, but the fae around us were doing far worse. The party had picked up steam. The dance was faster. The clothes were scantier. The drinks were flowing. I could hear moans of ecstasy coming from nearby rose bushes. Other revelers didn't bother to hide themselves, laying entwined on the grass just outside of the circle.

By now, I was telling Clara all about Forrest, our bargain, and every moment that had transpired between us. Except for the frog thing, of course.

She was an attentive audience.

Finally, when I was done, she looked at me thoughtfully. "You're soooo into him."

She laughed.

I laughed too, leaning back on the grass next to her and staring up at the stars.

"But I get it," she said quietly. "They're slow to love and hard to read. At least, for us."

I shivered.

"Are you cold?" she asked.

"A little," I said, my teeth chattering.

"That's the purple ones. You can't drink too many in a row without that happening." Clara paused for a moment. "Promise not to freak out?"

"About what?" I asked.

She held out her hand, and a small flame roared to life in her palm. She offered it to me. "Here, it won't hurt you. It'll warm you up."



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Tentatively, I whisked a single finger through the top of the flame. I felt nothing but a soothing, warm heat. So, I held out my hand, and she passed the flame over.

"This feels great," I said. "How can you do this?"

She shrugged. "I'm not really sure. I only just found out about it."

A moment later, Forrest and Clara's fae man were towering over us.

Forrest cleared his throat. "Ahem."

I bolted upright and straightened my gown with my hands.

His eyes sparkled with mirth.

The other fae, harsh and hulking but with a slight hint of a smile now, said, "Come, Clara. We have what we need."

He bowed to Forrest, and Clara did the same.

Before she left, Clara reached into her cloak pocket and pulled out a soft green candle with raised white and gold leaves. She handed it to me. "Here. I want you to have this."

"Oh! It's so pretty, and is it handcarved? I can't accept this. You've already gifted me your sommelier skills."

"Of course you can. This is your engagement party."

For the first time, Ivan spoke directly to me. His voice was a deep rumble but oddly soothing. "That's not just any candle, princess. Clara has a rare flame magic. Her candles are imbued with it."

Clara's eyes twinkled. "He's right! That candle will burn for years."

Ivan looked down at her and raised an eyebrow. "What Clara has forgotten to tell you is that she imbues each candle with a wish. I won't pretend to understand her magic, but they often come true. What's this one, my meddlesome flame? 'Fess up."

She crinkled her nose. "Why do you always have to spoil my fun?"

I looked at her expectantly.

"It's love. Whether it comes true is up to you. It can be filial love or romantic love. The way I see it, love is always a gift."

She beamed, and I smiled back.

Then, unexpectedly, she leaned in and gave me a tight hug. I felt her hand in my dress pocket and a soft whisper in my ear, "There's more under the white rose bushes."

Clara stepped back and said out loud, "I hope we'll meet again."

I did, too. I also couldn't wait to ditch Forrest, so I could see what in the twelve kingdoms she had left in my pocket. Maybe the white-haired fae was right, and she was a meddler. I smiled.

The odd couple bowed once more and quickly departed back to their land of

nightmares, frost, and flame.

Forrest reached for my hand. "Shall we dance? I've had more than enough diplomacy for one night." He grumbled the last bit in a low voice.

On our way back to the faerie circle, we were interrupted once more. Another important political guest. Forrest's shoulder sunk, but he smiled politely.

After a few minutes, I looked up at Forrest and batted my eyes in what I hoped appeared to be dumbstruck devotion. "Love, would you mind if I left you and your enchanting companion for just a moment? My throat is parched."

"Not at all. Please." He gestured for me to take my leave, and I did.

I hurried behind a trailing lattice of jasmine and quickly reached into my pocket. I felt something fragile and moist. Carefully, I liberated the object from my pocket and let out a gasp as I set eyes on it. *Susurrus*! Clara had found it!

The little plant even had its roots intact. I knew she said there was more, but just in case, I hid it carefully at the jasmine's base, topping its roots with fresh soil to prevent them from drying out. I'd come back tomorrow morning to collect it. Hopefully, I'd find more.

I had scarcely straightened when I noticed a familiar man approach—young and handsome with eyes like liquid gold. He dipped into a long, deep bow. When he finally rose, he said, "Good evening, my queen to be."

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"Hathorne!" I called, hurrying over.

He laughed and pulled me into a tight embrace, spinning me around once and setting me back down. "You seem to be in fine spirits."

"I've had a few cordials," I admitted.

He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Don't drink the green. I'm only half fae, and they wreck me."

I nodded fiercely. "I have been twice warned." My words were a bit more slurred than I would wish.

"Where is your betrothed?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes and inclined my head toward him.

He frowned. "Politics during his own engagement revel? Poor form." Then he shook his head. "Forgive me. That wasn't something I'd repeat."

I waved away his apology.

"Can I make it up to you with a dance?"

I nodded. "Certainly, fair sir."

He laughed again. "You're pissed, princess."

"I am not pissed. I am only ever so slightly buzzed," I said in a sing-song voice.

"Absolutely pissed. Come on, let's see if you can dance it off."

He pulled me into the faerie circle itself. We joined hands with each other and the fae on either side of us. I was next to a woodland nymph. As I grasped her hand, vines shot around my wrist and a petal pink flower bloomed that matched my dress. She smiled warmly at me. Then I was lost in the dance. It was fast and free. My legs kicked, my arms swung, and my body swiveled in time with the ring. I saw how easy it would be to get lost in the movement.

After a few minutes, Hawthorne pulled me out of the ring and to his chest for a dance in the center. It was strange to be so close to another man. His scent was very different from Forrest's—musk and warm spice. Perhaps, it was because he was half-human and not as connected to the ocean and isle.

The question fell from my lips. "You're half fae, right?"

His smile dimmed. "Yes, my mother was a stolen bride."

I looked up at him with wide eyes. "I had no idea. I—"

The conversation did not progress. We were interrupted by a firm hand gripping my shoulder. I turned and found Forrest's piercing eyes locked on mine. "May I cut in?" he asked.

From the look on his face, I could see the answer "no" would be met with a lightning strike and a Hawthorne shaped smudge on the floor. Overhead, the night sky darkened as ominous clouds began to roll in. A distant roll of thunder boomed. A few partygoers turned to stare at us.

"Forrest," I squeaked.

Hawthorne dipped into a shallow bow and placed my hand in Forrest's. "Of course, my king. Have a pleasant evening."

Forrest pulled me to his chest with a small growl. "Georgia, are you okay?"

"Am I okay?" I exclaimed. "Are you okay? You looked like you were going to call a storm right here in the middle of the revel. Is this about Hawthorne? Are you angry I danced with him?"

"Hathorne! How do you know that wretched snake's name? When did you even meet?"

"Forrest, there's nothing romantic going on. I met him in the library, and he recommended a few books. We're just friends."

He growled, "Do not go near that man again."

"You have to be kidding."

"He is dangerous. He works with the unseelie court. You know, the one that tried to kill you."

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I sighed. "I know that already. He is a liaison. It doesn't mean he agrees with everything they do."

"Please listen to me. That man is poison."

I couldn't reconcile Forrest's account with the easygoing man I had been getting to know—the one that smiled and laughed often. Hawthorne had helped me at every turn.

I started to pull away from Forrest, but I stumbled. The faerie cordials I had imbibed seemed to only be growing in strength, and the crowd around us felt like a blur.

The Fae King caught me, and I allowed myself to be reeled back into his embrace. Still, I wasn't happy about it. By the third time I stepped on his foot, he grimaced in pain. I couldn't help but smile. Stupid frog.

Just when I thought it wasn't possible, he drew me closer still. He kissed and nipped his way up my neck until he reached my ear and purred, "Georgia, are you angry with me?"

Everywhere he touched burned, and I longed to press myself up against the full heat of his body. Instead, I smiled for all the room to see and hissed into his ear, "Seething."

He pulled back ever so slightly. "What? Why? Is this about Hawthorne?"

It was the cordial that had loosened my lips enough to allow me to whisper, "No, you

idiot. It's because you let me believe we had something real."

He gazed down at me fiercely. "We do have something real."

I frowned. "I want to believe you, but you've already fooled me once."

He wrapped his arms around me protectively and unfurled his beautiful wings. A soft sigh escaped my lips unbidden.

"May I?" he asked.

I nodded.

All eyes turned to us as he swept me into a brief but beautiful twirl and then lifted us higher and higher into the sky. "Hold on tight," he whispered.

He flew us over the heads of the partygoers, and with the cordial running through my veins, I felt no fear of the height whatsoever. Instead, I gazed at the pretty blurred lights and mesmerizing movement of the circle below. He flew us outside of the courtyard and landed us by a nearby pond.

Pink water lilies floated serenely across the surface. It felt fitting to be here. It reminded me of that first night we had met. When things had looked so promising.

He tilted my chin up, so that I was gazing into his intense, penetrating green eyes. Then he placed one of my hands on his chest, so that I could feel the steady, rhythmic beat of his heart.

I bit my lip uncertainly.

"Georgia." He whispered my name like an answer, like a prayer. "Maybe I am a fool



to admit it, but my heart has never beat like this for another. My feelings are real, and if you wish it, our marriage can be real too." He paused for a moment. "I will gladly give you my forever. But if you're not ready or if you don't feel the same way, I will understand. I'll take whatever you give me—moments, years, or a lifetime."

He could omit. He could deceive. But he couldn't lie.

He had offered me forever. My heart fluttered. Blaming it on the drinks, I let him hold me close.

We stood like that for a long time before returning to the party.

## CHAPTER 33

### The Fae King

Something felt different, lighter.

When I returned to my room, I opened my tunic and stared down at my chest. The little black dots that had circled my heart for so long had vanished, leaving creamy, smooth skin behind.

Over the last few weeks, I had noticed them slowly fading away.

Georgia hadn't healed my soul rot, but she had shown me that I could.

When I was first cursed, I wasn't that worried. I thought surely it would be easily lifted. Oh, how wrong I had been! Over the course of a decade, I had consulted ancient texts, witches, and healers. No one had been able to help me.

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Then I believed my life was over. All I could see were the things out of my reach. I could never travel again. I would never have the strength to protect anyone. I couldn't be a good king. I could never have love, intimacy, or marriage. I couldn't even have true friendship.

Then she forced me to realize I was stronger than I believed. Over the course of our brief acquaintanceship, I had traveled to the human realm, called storms and lightning, saved a life, and fallen in love. None of that was supposed to be possible. One by one, Georgia had helped me tear down my walls.

Then, miracles of all miracles, she had accepted me for who I was—slimy, green skin and all. She showed me I didn't need to be perfect to be enough. She showed me I was worthy of love.

Though things were still shaky between us, I could see a future I had never believed possible—one with love and happiness.

For the first time in a long time, I was desperate to live.

## CHAPTER 34

### The Stolen Bride

Despite the wild night before, I woke at dawn. As soon as the sun was above the horizon, I tiptoed out of my room and made my way to the courtyard. To my surprise, the garden and lawn were immaculately clean, not a blade of grass was out of place. The brownies had been hard at work.

There was only one thing they had missed—the entangled couples or passed out singles. I supposed stirring a drunk fae was ill-advised even for them. Luckily, they all appeared to be soundly asleep. So, I moved quietly and attracted no notice.

I had no trouble finding the now-closed-up night jasmine and my hidden susurrus underneath. I placed it gently inside the small picnic basket I carried. Then, stepping over a sleeping nymph, I went to investigate the white rose bushes. Clara had said there was more susurrus to be found. I kneeled down and found the floor blanketed with them.

"Hello, my little ones," I whispered.

They whispered back, and my mouth dropped open. Their words were impossible to discern, but I hadn't expected to hear them at all. Not yet. They hadn't been planted correctly. I believed it was the combination of plants from Momma's song that made the magic work. There was no lion's mane, rosemary, or countless other plants here. Perhaps, the susurrus was even more powerful than I had imagined.

I had no idea how many plants I would need. One, a dozen, one hundred. I settled for filling my picnic basket to the brim.

## CHAPTER 35

### The Stolen Bride

For the five long nights of the Full Moon Revel, I had been the perfect bride to be. I had imbibed enough cordial to sink a ship and danced so much my feet would be sore for weeks. Now, it was time for Forrest to uphold his end of our bargain.

Tonight was Magnolia's sixteenth birthday, and I would be there to see her on her special day. Unfortunately, seeing was all I would be doing. I had been sloppy with

the wording of our latest bargain. Forrest had promised to take me to see my sister, but he hadn't promised she would see me. Damn fae.

"It's too risky," he said. "You know what they would do if they saw either of us. It would jeopardize our union and the future of our kingdoms."

But I didn't want to see everyone. I just wanted to see Magnolia.

Nonetheless, bargains were binding, and I had made a less than ideal one. So, we traveled to my kingdom in glamoured cloaks of invisibility. I would walk back into my old life as an observer only. Forest had attempted to soften the blow with a gift, a small golden shell.

"What's this?" I asked with a frown. It reminded me of the one I wore around my neck. The last echo of Briar.

"Give this to Magnolia. I left a matching shell on your pillow. If you speak into it, she will be able to hear you. Now, you will be able to talk any time you wish."

My heart skipped a beat. His gift wasn't expensive, but it was heartfelt and kind. Forrest was showing me that he was listening, that he understood me, or at least a part of me. He knew how much I missed my younger sister, and he wanted to help us stay close. To me, this little shell was priceless.

Forrest and I neared a row of opulent, colorful homes called the Seven Ladies of the Sea. Together, they formed a pastel rainbow.

"Pull your hood up, and step lightly," he instructed.

Grudgingly, I lifted the hood over my blonde hair.

Forrest chuckled to himself. "Then again, tread as loud as you wish, we walk among mortals. They're as dull sensed as they are witted. You could trod on dresses and step on toes, and they'd be none the wiser."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Present company excluded, of course," he added quickly.

Then, he slipped his hand through mine.

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As I entered the stately home, I beamed. I'd never called on Lord Bannister's estate, but I would have done so if I had continued my social season unimpeded. I looked at the ladies in their beautiful gowns and the men in their dapper suits. No one was bare chested. No ladies were exposing their bodies. There were no heady dances or twinkling stars or dangerous drinks. There was no magnetic pull to the dance.

It was ordinary. It was boring.

No, I corrected myself. It was right.

When I stepped into that faerie circle, I had been exhilarated, yes, but I had also been a little frightened. These were my countrymen. This was where I belonged.

I moved carefully among the crowds. Despite Forrest's snarky comment, I did not want to tread on anyone's gown or shoes.

I heard a familiar voice ahead. It was my sister's friend, Catie, and her mother. I hurried toward them. Perhaps, my sister was with her. The thought was too good to be true.

"Now, don't you go running off tonight. I want you indoors at all times," Catie's mother instructed.

Catie groaned. "But mother, it's so terribly hot. I might wish to step out for a bit of air on the veranda between dances."

Her mother shook her head. "Don't you dare let me catch you with a foot outside of

this ballroom. Do you want to end up like Georgia?"

My breath caught at the mention of my name.

"Cast her lot in with some fae." She said the word fae with palpable disgust.

A sudden surge of protectiveness rose within me. Forrest, Harry, Rosie, and Hawthorne were people. There was nothing disgusting about them.

"Mother," hissed Catie. "That's only a rumor. You shouldn't repeat it."

Her mother scoffed. "The guards by the gate saw them go. They say she put up no fight. As far as I'm concerned, she went willingly. Just like that sister of hers. The whole family is wild and caught up in disgrace."

"Mother," she howled. "I adore Magnolia, and her father is the king. You can't talk that way."

"King or not, I want you to stay away from that girl. The family has no moral standard."

Catie started to protest, but her mother plastered a false smile on her lips. "Now, then, my dear. Go and circulate."

Catie stormed off, and, before I knew it, she was inches away from walking straight into me. I could imagine how it would play out. She would fall to the floor. Yet, no one would see an impediment. It would look odd. It would raise suspicion.

I opened my mouth in an "o" of shock, preparing myself for the collision.

But seconds before its occurrence, hands encircled my waist, and I was pulled neatly

back a step. My pulse quickened, and warm lips caressed my ear. "Careful, love."

I stood in shock. How could this be? I assumed my father would hide all mentions of my disappearance. I assumed there would be a story of my taking ill with hay fever. I never, ever expected such vicious rumors.

Did everyone else think this?

I ripped away from Forrest's protective embrace, forgetting the shell in my pocket and tonight's mission. Instead, I sought information. I passed men and women, dancing in step, and carefully weaved through them. Then I spotted them, Maribel and Circe, the two biggest gossips in the colony. They were talking about dress fashions.

Maybe everything was okay. If my name was in ruins, they'd certainly be talking about it. My breath came a little slower. Catie's mom was just being suspicious due to her proximity to my family. My elder sister's scandal was already common knowledge. Perhaps, she was just embellishing after not seeing me out and about.

Just then, I felt the energy in the room shift. The gossiping Circe and Maribel stopped talking and turned to stare. I followed their gaze and landed on my sweet Maggie.

She was dressed in a peach gown that matched the natural coloring in her cheeks. Her head was held high, but her eyes were distant.

Heads turned to watch her entrance. She was a princess, and tonight was her birthday. Still, something felt off.

Maribel whispered, "I can't believe her father is permitting her out of the house."

"He must be truly desperate to make a marriage match."



Maribel considered Circe. "You know, perhaps, it is clever. He could marry her off before the scandal with his middle daughter is widely known."

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"He'd better marry her off tonight then. Two whores in the same family, he must be devastated," muttered Circe.

Maribel nodded her agreement. "That's what happens with the mother dead and buried. Rest her soul."

I gasped, and I was moments from tossing my cloak aside to defend myself against such slander.

Forrest grasped my hand and led me away. "Come," he said in a voice so soft only I could hear it.

I shook my head in protest, but I didn't pull my hand away.

He tugged me past dancers and onlookers and up the curved rail and stairs. My breath was coming hard and fast. I didn't know whether I would cry or scream. Both seemed equally likely.

I knew Circe and Maribel. By the end of the night, more than half of the ballroom would know of my disappearance with a fae. By the next ball, there would be embellishment. By the third ball, my chances of even visiting my kingdom would be crushed.

I thought by leaving I was protecting Maggie. I thought she would be spared from a terrible marriage to a fae. Instead, I had ruined all of her prospects. I had brought ruin on the entire family. Father would have no alliance. Would our little kingdom survive without it? I couldn't be certain.

A hand rested on my back, stroking small, steady circles.

I stared down at the carpet, heaving in breath after breath. "Nothing will ever be the same."

"No," he agreed quietly.

I barely realized I had spoken the words aloud.

I wasn't crying because people were gossiping about me. I wasn't crying because I wouldn't be able to marry a human nobleman. I was crying because my hopes and dreams were built on lies—ones I had lovingly told myself.

It was time to release them.

I knew in that moment that I would never be able to return to my old life. Even if the curse broke, even if Forrest didn't want me, I wouldn't be welcome.

I thought of how we had entered the party tonight unseen by everyone around us. I would forever be a ghost or a shadow in my own kingdom. I was no longer a part of this world.

I had been holding on to this dream that I could return, if I wanted.

Tonight, that dream had fractured.

I had been living under the delusion that somehow time would rewind. I had believed that one day Briar, Magnolia, and I would be together again—that we would dine at our father's table, escape balls, laugh and carry on across the familiar sandy soil, and scream up at the night sky.

But we couldn't go back.

I couldn't go back.

Suddenly, everything had changed, and I wasn't ready.

I sunk onto the floor, my gown pooling around me. The room was empty, and the door was closed, but it wouldn't have mattered if it weren't. Tears were already racing down my cheeks.

Forrest was quiet. He sat down on the ground beside me and pulled me against his chest. I was too heartbroken to feel embarrassed. I cried and cried until his shirt was soaked through. He traced circles on my back and let me.

"You humans even lie to yourselves," he said sadly. His words could have been construed as taunting, but I knew better. The truth was, he was right.

Forrest didn't steal my happiness from me. It had already flown away long ago, and I was simply too stubborn to accept it. Mother was dead. She was never coming home. Even if Briar miraculously returned, things would never be the same. Briar was ruined. She would never be accepted at society events. Father might not have the heart to turn her away from our home, but she would be hidden.

I wasn't fifteen anymore. Magnolia wasn't a little girl anymore.

Time had passed. Our childhoods were over. Mine had been gone for a long time, but somehow, I hadn't been willing to see it.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Of a perfect memory," I answered, swiping a hand across my swollen red eyes.

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He cocked his head to the side in surprise. "Perfect, yet it makes you cry?"

"It was a moment that is now gone, and it will never be again."

He stretched his long fingers and laced them through mine. "Tell me about it."

It was the memory that often played through my mind before I went to bed each night. The one that left me with a soft smile on my face as I drifted to sleep. Maybe if I told him, I could begin to let it go.

I sniffed. With no other alternatives, I wiped my nose on the sleeve of my cloak. I knew Forrest wouldn't mind. He wasn't exactly the sort of man to carry a pocket handkerchief.

Then I said, "It was a beautiful summer day. My sisters and I were together, all three of us. We were running across the gardens, and our hands were linked. We were laughing. The sun was high, and the ocean wind was warm on our cheeks. We were happy. I don't remember when it happened. Maybe it didn't happen at all."

"Maybe it is yet to come."

I shook my head. "No. Briar has been gone for five years. We're all older now. We're not girls anymore."

"Adults can laugh, too."

"Not any that I've known."

He looked into my eyes for a long time, and I gazed back into his viridian pools.

"If it's in my power, I'll make you deliriously happy one day," he said.

My eyes widened. He'd just made a promise, given freely. He was bound to it.

"Free me," I demanded.

He smiled sadly. "That wouldn't make you deliriously happy, and you know it. Even if you're not willing to admit it... yet."

I said nothing but held his hand tightly in mine.

He was right. I would stay for my kingdom and my family. I would stay for Forrest, too, because a part of me longed for that deliriously happy moment with him. Maybe even a lifetime of them.

Eventually, I was strong enough to find Magnolia, drop the shell in her pocket, and whisper a faint, "Happy birthday. I love you."

## CHAPTER 36

### The Stolen Bride

After the ball, I couldn't stop thinking of Briar. I knew we couldn't go back in time. I knew we couldn't go home again. But I still longed to see her.

All of the plants looked healthy. Everything was planted just as I remembered. Why wasn't it working? Where had I gone wrong?

Of course, I had been very young in that memory. I might have forgotten a detail, or

perhaps, the garden needed to mature.

I trailed my finger along the plush white rose blossoms. Did they need fertilizer? Then I pricked my finger on a thorn, and a drop of blood dripped into the fertile earth. Suddenly, the garden came to life. Whispers rose up from the susurrus, and I kneeled down to listen.

"Hello," I said softly.

"Hello, beautiful child."

The voice was familiar. One I had heard once before in a memory. "Gran?" I asked.

The flowers laughed, and the sound was as gentle as a bee's buzz. "You remember. How wonderful. Your mother would be so proud."

Hope and longing swelled in me. "Is she here?"

"No, love. I'm sorry. Is there something I can help you with? I'm afraid your spell is very weak. It won't last long, and goodness knows you didn't plant this garden to talk to an old lady," she whispered.

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Despite the soft volume, I heard shrewdness in her tone, the sort that came from raising many children and knowing their moods and feelings like the back of her hand. I found myself wishing I had known this wise woman, my gran.

But there was no time for that now. "My older sister. Can you tell me where she is?"

There was a pause before Gran answered, "She rests with us now."

Her single whisper was joined by many others, but I couldn't make out any of their words.

Panic rose in my chest. "You don't mean..."

Gran's voice was softer now. The spell was beginning to fade. "She is dead. I'm so sorry."

My heart was breaking. How could any of this be true? How could Briar be dead? Hawthorne had told me she was alive. He couldn't lie! Had she died recently, or had he himself had been lied to?

My frantic thoughts were interrupted. "Your mother wishes me to tell you something."

"Momma?" I asked, my voice cracking. I longed to hear my mother's voice, for her to tell me everything was okay.

Instead, Gran whispered back, "She says she loves you always, and she's sorry."



"Sorry for what?" I asked desperately.

The only reply was a soft, barely intelligible whisper. "Ask your husband-to-be."

I flattened myself against the ground, trying to hear more, but the flowers were still and silent. The garden had fallen back asleep, and I had no idea how to wake it.

The flowers had given me all the answers they could.

I lay on the ground for hours and hours, crying until my breathing finally slowed and sorrow crept into my bones. I stared at the darkening sky until I accidentally fell asleep.

When I woke, the stars were out.

It was time to talk to my husband-to-be.

## CHAPTER 37

### The Fae King

The door to my study swung open, and Georgia entered. I knew at once that something was terribly wrong. It was so late it was early. Her dress was disheveled and dirty, and her eyes were red and puffy. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

I stood up from my desk and tried to pull her into my arms.

She jerked backward violently. "Don't touch me," she hissed.

Now, I was even more worried. "Georgia, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm not okay. She's dead!" she screamed.

It was the piercing, primal scream of a woman who had lost everything. I had heard it once before. From her mother. The horrible memories of that day threatened to flood me, but I pushed past them. "Who's dead?" I asked.

Stars above, if something had happened to her younger sister after I had promised my protection, she would eat me alive, and I would deserve it.

Instead, she hissed out the name of another sister, "Briar."

I was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

She stabbed a finger in my chest and looked up at me with hatred. "The flowers told me."

"The flowers?" I echoed. Nothing about this conversation was making sense.

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She started pacing around the room, and I made out a word here and there. "My gran... ancestors... susurrus." That last word pulled the puzzle together for me.

My heart quickened. Somehow, Georgia had performed a spell and contacted her ancestors. Working with susurrus would have made it relatively simple, but where did she get the idea? Had someone helped her?

Now she knew the terrible truth—Briar was dead.

Unfortunately, there was still more she didn't know. As I looked at the pain and hurt swimming in her eyes, I longed to tell her everything. But I couldn't.

Briar was dead, yes. But the changeling who had assumed her place... she was alive and well. She had also ensnared me in a bargain. One that forced me to hold my tongue. One I was regretting immensely right now.

When I had made that bargain, I had been afraid of my curse becoming known. I had been afraid of losing my crown. Now, I had lost something much worse—Georgia's trust. And I feared, any moment now, I would lose her too.

"How can you be so cruel?" she screamed. "You let me walk around, believing she was alive, believing that one day we might be reunited. I knew your kind stole brides, but I didn't know they murdered them."

She swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand, trying to see through the free-falling tears. "Gran said to ask you what happened. Do you know who killed her? It wasn't- it wasn't you, was it?"

I stopped cold as horror washed over me. How could she possibly think that? "No, Georgia! Of course not. That's not what happened. Your sister was never a stolen bride. She came here on her own." That much I could say, but it didn't matter. She didn't let me finish.

Her cheeks turned bright red, and her eyes changed from sorrow to rage. "No," she screamed, balling her fists. "She was stolen. She would never leave us. Not after our mother-"

"You know I cannot lie," I said softly, trying to make her see reason, but it was too little, too late.

"You cannot lie, but you can deceive. I will never believe another word coming from your lips for as long as I live."

I was losing her, and my heart ached. Was there nothing I could say to convince her? "Can't you see, like it or not, our fates are intertwined? You are meant to be here," I said desperately.

She looked at me with cold eyes. "The only reason I'm here is because you dragged me."

I growled in frustration. "That's not true! You didn't want to marry that old man from Frost Haven. You were desperate to see your sister again. You would have made your way to these shores with or without me—or died in the attempt."

She bit her lip then shook her head wildly. "No, I won't listen to you. I won't let you sway me. I might have-"

"Might have what?" I exploded. "Stayed home, locked away from the ocean waves, sunshine, and everything wild and beautiful. Married some boring, ancient

aristocrat?" I gripped her shoulders and stared pleadingly into her eyes. "Can't you see?"

She lowered her voice into a deadly whisper. "I never want to see you ever again."

Tears pricked the corner of my blighted eyes, but I refused to wipe them. Instead, with a deep breath, I growled, "Then I release you from our bargain."

I watched Georgia turn her back and run—away from me, away from everything we had so delicately built together. Like seashells, our fragile pieces shattered so easily.

I hung my head. Why wouldn't she run? I had stolen her. I had kept secrets from her. I was a cursed, broken man who had nothing to offer her.

Cold, dark, numb despair engulfed me.

Harry found me. "Is something wrong? I saw Georgia in the hall. She looked upset."

It took me a moment to hear his words. I was so numb. My soul rot was likely eating my heart as we spoke. "I told her everything. I released her from our bargain," I finally murmured.

Harry's eyes widened, and he shook me by the shoulders. "Forrest, snap out of it! You have to go after her."

"And do what?" I murmured.

"Whatever it takes! Get down on your knees and beg for her forgiveness. Not just for the curse, for yourself."

"For myself?" I asked.

"You ended your bargain for goodness sake. You love her, you idiot."

I did. Of course, I did. I loved Georgia with my whole soul-rotted heart. I loved her ocean eyes that looked for the goodness in others. I loved her coral lips that spoke such clever words. I loved her hardworking hands that raised plants from the soil. I loved the loyalty that pulsed through her veins—that unyielding defense of her family, friends, and kingdom. Most of all, I loved her wild heart.

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To me, Georgia was as bright and beautiful as the sun glinting along the ocean's waves. I didn't want to live without her.

Snapping out of my stupid, I said, "You're right. I have to do something."

I ran out of my chamber and down the twisting, turning halls of the castle until I found myself suddenly transported just feet away from the front doors. Blessed faerie circles. I could always count on them to take me where I needed to go.

Just ahead, I saw Georgia with her skirts gathered in her hands, running at full tilt toward the castle doors. People in the hallway were staring at both of us, but I didn't care.

"Wait!" I cried.

She didn't stop. She was headed down the stairs now.

She was running from me.

"Georgia, please!"

The realization was like a punch to the gut. I had finally ruined things between us. All of my secrets. All of my lies. If only I could explain. Maybe she would understand. I never meant for any of this to happen. Not like this.

I unfurled my wings and prepared to take to the dark night sky. Only, it wasn't so dark at all. The sun was beginning to rise.

I should stop. I knew I should stop. There might still be time to find cover before the change became unavoidable.

But hiding would mean losing her.

Maybe forever.

So, I kept running. Flying was too dangerous. I could fall out of the sky like a bird with broken wings. The tremors started, and I had to stop running.

To my surprise, Georgia slowed too, and for a moment, my heart felt lighter. She was going to turn around.

I cried out one more time, "Please, Georgia."

But she didn't turn around.

Instead, he appeared in front of her. The bane of my existence. The blight of the island. The vicious snake I had let into my own Advisory Council. Hawthorne.

Why was he here? Had she called him?

I watched as Hawthorne took Georgia into his arms and held her close. He patted her back soothingly. Then, as if he had known I would be watching, he glanced over her shoulder at me and smirked.

It was evident from the Full Moon Revel that they had met, but I had no idea how deep this relationship went. Of course, Hawthorne didn't actually like her. I knew that. He loathed all humans, but that wouldn't stop him from playing with her feelings. He believed fae and human entanglements should be outlawed due to his own unhappy childhood. I had long suspected him guilty of killing his own human



mother.

Even if she hated me, I had to get her as far away from him as possible. I started forward on legs that shook and burned like fire, but I wasn't fast enough.

Hawthorne offered Georgia something in the palm of his hand, and she reached out for it.

"No," I shouted.

But it was too late, Georgia vanished.

And I fell to the ground in despair. With all of my defenses down, the change overcame me quickly. My whole body shuddered, and I transformed into a frog. Right there in front of the castle doors, for all to see.

Including him.

Not minutes later, a shadow engulfed me, and I looked up to see Hawthorne leering over me. "Well, well, well, my king." Acrid sarcasm filled his last word. "Aren't we looking a bit green?"

"Hawthorne," I hissed.

He inspected his fingernails before sneering down at me. "Save your breath. There's no need for a fancy speech about saving your crown and kingdom."

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The truth was I didn't have one. All the hope had left my body. I was adrift.

As Hawthorne lifted his boot, I prepared for a final crushing blow.

Instead, he nudged me hard with his boot. "You're not even worth killing. Hop along now. The grown-ups have important matters to attend to."

### CHAPTER 38

#### The Stolen Bride

With my heart pounding in my ears, I turned and ran. All I wanted was to leave this wretched island and forget I had ever laid eyes on Forrest.

I could hear him calling my name, but I didn't turn back. I was afraid if I looked at him, I would change my mind. I didn't want to change my mind. He had lied to me. He had betrayed me. All I wanted was to go home.

I ran down the castle steps and then I stopped.

There was only one way off the island—fae intervention. If I called Forrest, maybe he would help. He had freed me, but I couldn't face him, not now.

So, I called for the only fae I thought might help me, "Hawthorne!"

The man with golden eyes appeared before me in seconds. He stood firmly with his broad shoulders and heavy stance, taking in my tear-streaked face, wild hair, and

dirtied gown. He wrapped me in his warm embrace. "What's wrong, princess?" he asked.

"It's Forrest. Our engagement is over. I need to leave."

"He freed you from your bond?" he asked curiously.

I looked back over my shoulder. "Yes."

"And you wish to leave?" Hawthorne glanced back over his shoulder. If I had been paying more attention to him and less to my heartbreak, I might have noticed the uncharacteristically cruel glint to his smile.

"Please, he's coming. I can't"—my voice broke pitifully—"I just can't face him. Not now."

He held out his hand and offered a small, simple seashell. "Take this."

Forrest was closer now, just a dozen or so steps away. I could hear him moan, "Please, Georgia."

I felt like my heart was being cleaved in two.

No, I couldn't stay. Not like this. Not anymore.

I snatched the shell from Hawthorne's outstretched hand.

To my surprise, there was no time to consider my choice. There was no time to say thank you either. A gust of wind encircled me like a tornado, and moments later, I landed frightened but unharmed on the wooden deck of a sailboat.

I clutched at my heart. "Oh, my stars. Where am I?"

I sat up and looked around, feeling dazed. I was alone on a small sailboat in the middle of the ocean. I looked down at my palm where Hawthorne had pressed a small, simple shell. A faerie circle. I had no idea one could be contained in such a small object.

I looked out at the mist-shrouded island. There was no turning back now. There was only one thing to do.

Sail home.

## CHAPTER 39

### The Stolen Bride

Sailing the ship wasn't difficult. A powerful gust of wind seemed to be blowing me straight to the harbor. So, I sat on the deck, wrapped my arms around my knees, and watched the sun rise.

Wait. The sun. A thread of worry began to weave its way through me, wrapping around my spine and ensnaring my mind. What if Forrest had transformed? He had been standing right in view of the castle steps, and the sun had broken over the horizon just seconds later.

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I shook my head. No, I had no idea how much time had truly passed between my feet on the island and my feet on this boat.

Besides, I couldn't worry about him anymore.

If I didn't do something soon, I was going to have problems of my own. I was coming perilously close to docking at the largest port in our kingdom. This was the busiest time of the day. In my scanty fae gown and with this silver crown woven through my hair, I was going to attract a lot of unwelcome attention.

A princess was worth a hefty ransom, and I suspected the story of the stolen princess had made its way to the docks by now.

I felt my heart quicken. I had to do something fast.

First things first, I needed to get this crown off of my head. I worked my fingers through my hair, quickly pulling and teasing the strands out of their intricate braids. Once it was done, I was able to untangle the crown.

I looked at it in my hands for only a second before tossing it into the sea. I could not have this anywhere on my person or vessel.

I quickly shimmied off a matching necklace and ear cuff. I threw the necklace overboard but slipped the ear cuff into my bodice. I might need it to barter. It was the least expensive piece I had and the least suspicious.

Okay, no jewelry. That was better. I looked less like royalty at least.

But the dress. What could I do about the dress? It was a dead giveaway that I had come from the fae's island, and that alone was suspect. Few went to the island, and even fewer returned. Still, I couldn't go naked, and there were no other clothes on this boat.

That's when I made my second decision. While I couldn't drastically change course, I could veer a mile off. That would take me to the place I had never intended to visit, the fae market.

I hurried to the back of the stern and adjusted the tiller. I had only minutes before I would make landfall. So, I quickly splashed sea water on my face, washing away any traces of tear-streaked makeup. I glanced down at my body, looking for any other tells.

Then I spotted it, my sea glass ring—a painful reminder of Forrest's offer of forever. He had called down lightning and made the glass himself. I couldn't quite bring myself to toss it in the ocean waves. So, I slipped it into my bodice too.

As if it knew my arrival was imminent, the wind died down, and I slowly drifted into port.

I stepped off the boat as quickly as possible, not wanting to give any additional clues to my identity. Just in case any unfriendly eyes were watching.

The second my feet were on the dock, a powerful gust nearly blew me over. I turned back and saw my boat soaring across white-capped waves, returning home to its master.

The docks here were just as busy as the exclusively human ones but the company was more eclectic. A hulking redcap caught my eyes as I brushed past him.

I slowed to apologize, and he raised a suggestive eyebrow. "You can make it up to me, lamb? It'll only take a few minutes."

I ducked my head and kept moving. I felt vomit rising in the back of my throat. I knew what I appeared to be. I was a human woman in a fae marketplace wearing a fine but tattered gown. One of fae origin.

Worse still, I was wet from the breaking waves and ocean breeze in the sailboat, making my gown even more revealing.

To any outsider, I appeared to be a concubine of the fae court. I was going to be treated accordingly.

Despite that chilling revelation and several lewd catcalls, I made it through the market unscathed. The booths and stalls were filled with amazing things—trinkets, jewelry, spells, and clothes. A small part of me longed to stop and marvel at the stalls, but it would be foolish to do alone. Maybe I could come back with Forrest.

Then I caught myself. No, I couldn't come back with Forrest. I probably wouldn't ever see him again. Even if I wanted to. I felt tears beginning to well up but blinked them quickly away. Now was not the time. It wasn't safe to linger here. It certainly wasn't safe to look even more vulnerable.

Not long after, I found a human stall run by an old woman with shrewd eyes. She raised an eyebrow at me as I wandered over. I pulled the ear cuff from my bodice and offered it out to her to inspect.

"I need a dress and shoes."

"You have yourself a deal." She pocketed the ear cuff and provided no offer of change.

"But that ear cuff is worth thrice that."

She snorted. "This isn't a currency exchange booth, girly. Take it or leave it."

I took it.

She was happy enough with her ill-gotten gains to allow me to change behind her booth. I exited the market as a human woman in a human world.



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Before I reached the gates of my childhood home, I knew something was wrong. There were soldiers patrolling our perimeter. It wasn't uncommon to have a guard or two posted at our gate, but these were soldiers, not guards.

I ducked behind a magnolia tree and watched. The soldiers were moving in a rotation. Among our own uniforms were unfamiliar ones the color of steel and ivory. I had to assume they were from Frost Haven, the kingdom beyond the mountains.

But why were they here?

And how could I get past them undetected?

I heard the distinctive tink, tink of an object tapping glass. I looked around and realized this was the same tree I passed on my way to the isle—the one with a glass bottle fae trap. Something was inside. I grinned.

I wasn't as tall as Forrest, so I pushed my way through the thick magnolia limbs until I reached the tree trunk. I hoisted my skirts up and started climbing.

Moments later, I was back on the ground and peering into the jar. "Hello there," I said sweetly.

"Nasty human," two tiny wisps buzzed back angrily.

"You are wisps, are you not?" I asked, ignoring their unwelcome reception. "I would gladly free you for a favor."

"Free us first," said the first wisp. "Then we'll hear your favor."

"No, I'll need your word."

"She seeks a bargain," said the other with a sharp grin.

I wasn't about to let them set the terms. So, I said, "I will free you from this trap, and in exchange, you will immediately distract those soldiers along the perimeter. You will lead them off for no less than ten minutes. You will not seek to draw any attention to me. Do we have a bargain?"

"Free us!" The wisps buzzed and hit the sides of the jar like angry wasps.

I waited.

Finally, they said, "Yes, we agree."

I felt the bind of the bargain grip me, and I cracked the glass bottle against a large field stone. The wisps shot forward, buzzing and circling like dancing flames. Not one minute later, I saw the soldiers following them away from the gate.

I felt a twinge of guilt. It was disorienting and uncomfortable to be beguiled by wisps. Still, I grabbed my skirts and bolted out from the tree and through the gates. The grounds were relatively quiet, and I was used to sneaking in and out of our home.

So, staying behind tree and shrub cover, I made my way to Magnolia's window and climbed up the trellis. I tapped twice on the glass then waited. There was a very good chance Magnolia wouldn't be in her room, that she wouldn't hear me at all.

Miraculously, her face appeared in the window. My heart swelled. It was so good to see her.

"Georgia, is that really you?" she asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Tell me something only you know."

"The night of the season opener, we snuck champagne and went for a swim in the pond. You came back first and told father I was reading in my room."

She opened the window, and I crawled through.

I had barely straightened when she launched herself at me. "Oh, Georgia. I thought I'd never see you again. I was almost certain it was you through the shell, but I just didn't really know. How did you get here? Are you okay? Is he with you?"

I laughed and stroked her hair. "Silly goose. Of course, I came back. I will always come back."

She pulled back. "I'm not a child. I'm sixteen now. I want to know what's going on."

I nodded. "I'm sorry. I know. The Fae King ended our bargain. He allowed me to leave."

She cocked her head to the side. "Why would he do that?"

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Tears stung my eyes. Because Briar is dead. The words were hanging on my lips, but I didn't want to say them. Not now. We still had a couple of hours until the rest of the household woke for the day, and I wanted to enjoy this brief, bittersweet moment in my childhood home, sleeping on my old, familiar feather bed.

I pretended to yawn. "I'm really tired. Do you think we could talk more in a couple of hours?"

She nodded. "Of course, I'm sorry. It must have been a hard journey." She looked at me with those big round eyes and said, "Could you—could you stay here maybe? It's just, I'm afraid you'll disappear with the morning sun."

She reminded me so much of when she was a little girl, and she had begged for sleepover parties in my bedroom. I gave her a squeeze. "Of course, I'll stay."

She pulled out a spare shift from her wardrobe and handed it to me. "Probably better not to wake the house."

I nodded and stepped out of my gown from the market, leaving it in a puddle on the floor. I knew I wouldn't want to wear it again. Not with the memories of today woven into its fabric. I pulled on the clean shift and crawled into bed beside Magnolia.

"Why are there so many soldiers patrolling? Is everything okay?" I whispered.

"For now," she said ominously.

"What does that mean?"

"Tomorrow," she replied.

I wanted to protest, but I was bone tired. The second my head touched the pillow, I was asleep, breathing in the familiar smells of family and home.

## CHAPTER 40

### The Fae King

I'm ashamed to say that for several minutes I simply sat in the spot where Hawthorne had left me and wallowed.

Georgia didn't want me.

My curse was unbroken.

Hawthorne knew my secret.

My kingdom was on the brink of war.

The weight of my burdens threatened to drown me. What power did I have during the day? A king diminished to the size of a frog. A king not capable of surviving a rogue boot.

I shook away those unwelcome thoughts. I was the King of the Island. These were my people. These were my beaches. And, if necessary, I would die trying to save them. I hopped as fast as I could through the crowded corridors, narrowly avoiding boots at every turn. Finally, I reached the door to my private rooms.

Harry was waiting for me. He took in my frog form and the busy corridor I had just departed. "How bad is it?" he asked.

"Hawthorne knows about my curse."

Harry frowned. "Where's Georgia?"

I hung my tiny green head. "Gone."

"I'm sorry, Forrest. Truly."

"Thank you. I need you to call my council of advisors for an emergency session. Do not invite Hawthorne. He's fully revealed himself now."

"For this evening?" Harry asked.

I shook my head. "Now."

Harry started to protest. "But they'll see-"

"It's too late. Even if they want to take advantage of my weakness, even if they want my crown, I have to believe there are those on the council who will protect the seelie and the island itself."

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Harry nodded. "Give me ten minutes. I'll come back for you."

I nodded and began waiting the longest ten minutes of my life thus far.

Harry set me down in front of the council doors, and I hopped in of my own accord. My advisors showed a mixture of worry or annoyance on their features. Some were pacing. Most were talking. No one noticed my entrance until I leaped onto the table, just in front of my usual seat.

"What's a frog doing in here?" mumbled a redcap.

I cleared my throat. "Thank you all for coming on such short notice."

"King?" Rowan asked.

I nodded. "Everyone, please sit. Time is of the essence."

Everyone scrambled to their chairs. Several were casting confused looks at me, no doubt trying to figure out why I was in frog form. There was no time. If another day came, I would answer their questions then.

Though I was not outside, I could feel the heartbeat of the island. Subtle changes were already beginning. The wind was beginning to kick up, and soon the skies would darken. I prayed Georgia was somewhere safe.

"A storm is coming," I warned. "We don't have weeks or months to prepare. The time is now. The unseelie are making their move."

The redcap, Head of the Guard, leaned in. "You're sure?"

"Yes, I can feel the winds rising. The skies will be black before sunfall."

"You were able to stop that hurricane before," said Remus hopefully.

I sighed. "That hurricane was a test of our defenses. This will be a full blown assault. I won't be able to stop them this time. Not alone."

The Head of the Guard said in a gruff voice, "And who said you were alone? The redcaps are at your service. Just tell us what to do."

"More than redcaps," said Remus and Rowan together.

Other voices joined in solidarity.

Hope rose in my chest. We might lose, we might even die, but we would go out fighting.

## CHAPTER 41

### The Stolen Bride

The following morning I woke to angry shouts in the hallway. "Do not stand in my way! If she is here, I will see her!"

Groggily, I blinked my eyes. Was that Papa?

"Shh. Let her rest. She'll be awake soon enough." That voice was Maggie's.

Was this a dream? It was all so vivid. Not only could I hear their voices, but I could



smell the warm sunshine of fresh linens and the scent of jasmine wafting through the windows.

I opened my eyes and took in the old, familiar surroundings.

I was home.

Outside the door, the argument was growing more heated.

I fell easily into my old routine as middle sister, peacekeeping. I sat up in bed and called out, "Come in!"

My father charged in the door like a wild boar, his eyes darting around the room until they fell on me, sitting up and yawning in my sister's childhood bed.

The look of wide-eyed relief on his face melted my heart.

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"My Georgia," he cried, rushing forward.

In this moment, he wasn't a king, just my father. The man who had worried over me since my mother's death. The man who had in his own way always tried to protect me.

I rushed over to him, and he opened his arms to receive me.

He patted the back of my head. "My sweet girl. Home at last. I was afraid I'd never see you again. I thought you were lost forever, like your..."

Like my mother and sister.

"No, daddy. I'm okay. I'm here now."

He broke our embrace and held me at arm's length to appraise me. "Did he hurt you? How did you escape?"

I bit my lip. "I'm fine. He let me go."

My father narrowed his eyes. "Let you go?" he echoed.

I nodded.

"Don't worry. I will ensure he and his kind never return to our shores again."

Concern crept up my spine. I thought of the soldiers with unfamiliar uniforms

stationed along our gates. "What do you mean?"

"I have forged an alliance with Frost Haven. When you were stolen, I had already promised your hand to Regent Callahan."

My stomach dropped. Regent Callahan was the much older man from the ball with the lecherous, roving eyes. I couldn't marry him. I wouldn't!

My father continued as if he hadn't just said something of life-altering importance, "So, of course, they were furious. For too long, those waterwalkers have terrorized our kingdom with their storms and bargains and thefts. I can't promise to bring your sister back, but I can promise to end their reign of terror once and for all."

I fought back a swell of sorrow. No one could bring Briar back. Not now. But I wasn't foolish enough to say so out loud. Not when Papa was bringing us to the brink of an apocalyptic war. "No, you can't!" I cried. "It will only make things worse. The seelie are far better than the unseelie, and you could put them in power."

My father's eyes turned soft. "Georgia, no fae are 'better.' You spent too many weeks with them. I'm so sorry we couldn't get to you sooner. No doubt you've been deceived, glamoured, and drugged. I want you to know you're safe now."

"None of us will be safe if you start this war," I argued. "Please, trust me. My eyes are clear. There are no nectars or tinctures in my system."

He looked sadly at me once more. "Frost Haven has developed new weapons, ones that make our gunpowder explosives look like a flash from a lightning bug. Soon that miserable island will sink below the waves, your mind will be free, my daughter. I promise."

He turned to leave, and I grabbed his coattail. "No, please."

He said, "Magnolia, calm your sister, and whatever you do, do not let her out of your sight. There are guards posted at every door. If you need them, simply call out."

She nodded with wide eyes. "Yes, papa."

Without that, he left the room, clicking the lock behind him on his way out.

My heart sank. I was a prisoner once more. At least Forrest had never locked a door.

I turned to my younger sister. "Magnolia, do you believe me?"

She bit her lip and looked away. "I want to. I really do, but they stole you. They stole Briar. Maybe Papa is right."

"There's more to the story," I said softly. "But I'm afraid this one won't have a happily ever after."

An hour later, Magnolia knew everything—why I had been stolen, the threat of the unseelie, and the death of Briar.

Tears streamed down her face, but she had a defiant glint in her eyes. "We have to stop father. If the unseelie are as dangerous as you say, we can't risk an attack. We could accidentally topple the seelie and put the unseelie in power. I won't lose you and Papa too."

She was right. Papa had no intention of helping any fae, regardless of court, but he could very well shift the balance of power. I looked at her. "How can we stop him? We're locked in, and we can't use the trellis in broad daylight with so many guards."

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"You don't seriously think that lock is going to keep us in?" Maggie gave me a watery smile before fishing through her bedside table. She pulled out a hair pin.

I watched as my baby sister unlocked the door like a seasoned burglar.

"How long have you been doing this?" I asked in astonishment.

Mischief spread across her face. "Since I was eleven years old, and you told me I couldn't go out on the lawn unattended before sunrise."

"Magnolia!" I chastised.

She shrugged. "Nobody likes to be caged."

"I just wanted you to be safe."

"Funny. That's what papa just told you."

I joined her at the door. "You're right. You're sixteen now. Old enough for a bit more freedom. I promise I'll try harder to remember that."

She gave me another watery smile. "Come on. Let's go find Papa."

We made our way to the nearest verandah. It was shadowed by an old oak tree that had grown too large. Its limbs provided cover from two sides. It was our best chance to scale down unseen. That's when I heard it. A roll of distant thunder.

Magnolia frowned. "It looks like a storm is coming."

Sure enough, the horizon was pitch black, and storm clouds were coming in fast. My heart hammered out an ominous warning. Was it possible Forrest's secret had been discovered? Was it possible the unseelie were fighting for control of the island?

"Do you think they know about Papa's plans?" Magnolia asked.

I bit my lip. "I'm not sure."

A bolt of lightning split the sky, and I missed my next foothold on the trellis. I managed to hit the next but at an odd angle. I cried out in pain but continued to hang onto the trellis. Tears pricked my eyes.

"Georgia? Are you okay?" Magnolia called up from a few feet below.

"I think I've sprained my ankle," I said miserably.

"Can you go back up?" she asked.

I clung to the trellis. I wasn't sure my ankle would support my weight, but there really wasn't another option. I had to go up or down, and up was much closer. "I can do it," I said.

"I'll meet you back at the top."

"No," I said. "You should keep going. See if you can talk some sense into Papa."

She paused for a moment, then said, "Okay. Wait for me in my room."

I was able to pull myself up to the top of the trellis using my good foot and my hands.

Going back over the railing was the hardest part. It hurt.

When I looked back over, I saw Maggie was still waiting. "Go on!" I motioned.

I hopped on one foot into the house.

Back inside, the hallways were cast in shadow. It was midday, so there were no candles lit. The storm clouds were growing outside the window and blocking out the sun. Using the wall as support, I tried to put pressure on my ankle. It hurt, but it was possible. Slowly, I made my way back to Magnolia's room.

I let go of the wall and hopped to her bed. Then a roll of thunder shook the ground and window panes. Lightning cracked, illuminating the dark bedroom. Someone was waiting in the shadows. My eyes hadn't quite adjusted to the darkness, but I was beginning to make out a shape and features. My stomach dropped. It couldn't be.

"B-Briar?" I asked tentatively.

Briar was dead. Gran had told me so. Forrest had confirmed it. So, who or what was this—a ghost, witchcraft, or some sort of fae trick?

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She looked at me and smiled shakily. "I've missed you."

"How is this possible?" I whispered.

Briar stepped out of the shadowed corner of the room, so I could see her better. She looked almost the same as I remembered her—golden hair, fair skin, tall, and graceful. But she was older. Her face was sharper, less full. Her once wavy hair now fell straight. But most concerning of all, her ears came to sharp points.

My whole body trembled, and tears leaked out of the corner of my eyes. "This is a cruel trick, even for the fae."

In the soft voice she had used to soothe me after Momma died, she said, "It's not a trick, Georgia. It's me."

I shook my head. "I don't believe you."

"What can I say to make you believe me?" she begged. "How about something only we know? Like after Momma died, you slept in my bed every night."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "The nursemaids knew that."

She took a deep breath and nodded. "True enough. One summer, we found a swamp rabbit and raised it up in a box. We released it down by the pond with a saucer of water and a plate of carrots. You called him Nutmeg."

I loved that bunny. I wondered if anyone else had ever known about him. We had



kept him hidden all summer. Even if he had been discovered, how would anyone else know his name?

She kept going. "You once called Magnolia "Maggie Moo" in an argument over her table manners. She burst into tears. When Papa is in an especially good mood, he whistles. Momma's favorite plant was jasmine, and it grows just outside Papa's window even now. It nearly died one summer, and he hired ten gardeners to bring it back to life. They took cuttings, and it now grows in seven places."

Some of these stories individuals might know, but no one could know all of them. I started to limp toward her.

"Is there something wrong with your leg?" she asked.

"I twisted my ankle," I replied.

She rushed over and helped me into a sitting position. Then she joined me on the feather bed with her legs criss-crossed. Wordlessly, she began to examine my swollen ankle. "It's probably just a sprain. Should I wrap it?"

"I don't care about my ankle." I was laughing and crying at the same time. I pulled her into my arms. "It's you. It's really you."

"It's me," she said, stroking my hair the way she always had when I was upset.

I didn't move for a long time, just allowing myself to cry, soaking the shoulder of her dress while she comforted me. "How? How can you be alive? He said you were dead. The flowers said you were dead."

She pulled back. "The flowers? Never mind. It doesn't matter. You can tell me everything when we have more time."

I froze. "More time?"

"I can't stay long. Papa will find me."

"Of course, he will. He'll want to see you and Magnolia will too." My mind started turning. "In fact, you might just be able to stop a war."

She cocked her head to the side. "What?"

"Papa wants to start a war with the island. He's amassed men and weapons, but if we're both home and safe, maybe he could be persuaded to stop."

"Georgia." Her voice was sharp. "Look at me. Really look at me."

"Y-you are changed. I can see that clearly, but it's also you. I know it's you." I took her hand in mine. "What's going on? How did you escape?"

"I was never a stolen bride. I am the one who left the shell."

My mouth dropped open. Forrest had been telling me the truth. "But why? Why would you do that to us?"

Her words spilled out of her mouth. "Because I'm a changeling."

"You're a- you're a changeling." I stumbled over the words. It wasn't possible. Changelings were nasty and vicious. Nothing like Briar.

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"Do you remember the fever that took Momma?" she asked.

"Of course," I said.

"Your older sister was very sick too. Her fever was burning hot. Momma knew Briar wouldn't make it through the night. So, she slipped out and made her way to the fae market."

"No," I moaned. I knew what was coming next.

Briar nodded. "She made a bargain with a young fae. He was supposed to save Briar's life."

"But she got the wording wrong," I said softly.

Briar nodded. "When she got home, your sister died in her arms. She went to rouse servants, and when she returned, I was there, sleeping peacefully in her daughter's bed. She knew at once what had happened."

I frowned. "Why didn't she say anything to the servants?"

"She probably did, but who would believe a sobbing, grief-stricken woman with a high fever? I was taken to the nursery, so that mother could sleep. But she didn't sleep. She returned to the market, found the fae she had bargained with, and held iron to his throat."

I gasped.

"To save his wretched skin, he gave her passage to the island. She wanted to see the king of the island. She believed that, somehow, he could right her bargain and bring her daughter back."

"Forrest is powerful, but even he doesn't have dominion over the dead," I whispered.

Briar nodded. "Only the darkest of witchcraft could even attempt such a thing. I'm told he refused her coldly, and she retaliated by cursing him. But you probably know the rest of that story, don't you?"

I nodded. "Why didn't you tell me you were a changeling? How could you hide something like that?"

"I didn't know until I turned seventeen. Changelings rarely have memories from before. It started with subtle changes to my appearance. My eyes became brighter, and my hair lost its wave. I thought it was ordinary coming of age stuff.

"But it got worse. When I walked by a pool of water—a fountain or a pond—the water would turn white-capped. It even happened by the ocean one day. It felt as if there was something inside of me pulling the tides. It scared me.

"Then one morning, my ears changed. They were pointed. I wore my hair down and hid in my room all day. As soon as the sun fell, I snuck out and made my way down to the fae marketplace. I saw a fae woman with a kind face and a young child in her arms. I begged her to tell me what was happening.

"She brushed my hair back from my ears and inspected them carefully. 'My dear, isn't it obvious? You're a changeling,' she said.

"She dropped that bomb and just walked away, leaving me dumbstruck in the middle of the market."

"That must have been terrible," I said, clasping her hand in support.

"I knew I had to leave home. Your real family member was dead, and I had stolen her place. You would hate me. I hated myself. So, I left that shell in my bed, and I ran away." She broke down and started sobbing. "I'm so sorry."

I wrapped her in my arms. "No," I said, gently patting her back. "None of this is your fault. You didn't kill Briar. No one did. Her death was natural. You never asked to be dropped off in our home. You were so young. You must have been so scared when you found out. I wish you had told me. I cried for weeks when I thought you had been stolen."

"I'm sorry."

I rested my head on her shoulder. "I know."

"When you came to the island, I was so scared you would find me. I forced the Fae King into a bargain."

My heart quickened, and I pulled back suddenly. "You did what?"

She bit her lip. "I made him enter into a bargain with me. I made him promise to keep my secret and never tell you my location."

"Why would he agree to that?" I asked.

She buried her head in her hands. "Because I knew about his curse. I threatened to tell everyone."

I fell into silence. This changed everything.

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Briar was alive, and Forrest hadn't wanted to keep this secret from me. He had been forced to do so. I knew what it was like to be trapped in a bargain.

"What are you thinking?" Briar asked desperately.

For a moment, I am angry. "I think you should have trusted your family. I think you should have been honest."

She studied my face. "Have you fallen in love with the Fae King?"

"I... I have," I said slowly.

She frowned. "Then I suppose I have to tell you. The unseelie advisor discovered Forrest's secret."

I felt sick. "Hawthorne?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe that was his name. Do you know him?"

I sighed. "Apparently not." Forrest had tried to warn me. Why hadn't I listened to him?

"He told the Unseelie Queen. The island is at war. It's actually why I'm here. To warn you. A storm is coming, the worst we've seen in over a century. You need to take Magnolia and Papa and flee to the mountains. The entire kingdom will be underwater by tomorrow at nightfall."

I wasn't listening to Briar anymore. The news on the unseelie hit me like a gust of wind, stealing my breath. They knew Forrest's secret. The unseelie were making their move. They would seize the isle and destroy the mainland.

And him. They would kill him. Something seized my heart.

As strongly as I knew the storm was coming, I also knew I could not lose him. I had to return and fight for him, for us. Even if it killed me.

"Briar, I need you to wrap my ankle, and then I need you to listen to me. We're going to save the island and the kingdom. And more importantly, Forrest, Papa, and Maggie. But I can't do it without you. You can't run this time."

She clasped both my hands in hers and looked me dead in the eye. "I'm ready."

By the time I reached the fae market, my entire gown was soaked through and my ankle throbbed. A bolt of lightning split open the sky, and for a moment, the shadowy market was illuminated. There was no one here.

Most of the tables were empty, but some had been outright abandoned. Their wares left to proudly swing in the powerful gusts of wind. Several colorful handkerchiefs blew past me. Just outside the market, the ocean swells were growing larger and larger. No one in their right mind would wait here to be swallowed up.

I wouldn't be waiting either.

I hurried through the market and exited out onto the docks. The heavy rain showed no signs of stopping. Several boats had already been ripped out to sea and were being tossed around like toys in a bathtub. I watched as one of their sails was shredded and flew to and fro, like a victory flag.

I walked until I reached the end of the dock. There was an old, rusty metal ladder leading to an ancient dock below. I climbed downward, my ankle screaming with each weight-bearing step.

Each boat had a rope tied to a metal fitting on the dock. I was looking for a very specific fitting—one shaped like a conch shell. The rain was so thick now, I had to kneel down and check each one.

Finally, I found it.

I blinked the rain out of my eyes and stared out at the sea. Several feet away from the dock, I saw a vicious whirlpool churning violently.

I remembered the journey to the island—the dark, eerie depths of the sea, the feeling of my lungs burning for air, the water imps pulling my hair and tearing at my flesh, and the palpable fear of dying. I never wanted to relive those moments.

Yet, there was something I feared even more—losing him.

So, I closed my eyes and jumped.

## CHAPTER 42

### The Stolen Bride

I tried not to think of the icy cold water or the chance of drowning. I tried not to think of Briar and whether she would be able to convince Papa to call off his soldiers and retreat to the safety of the mountains.

Instead, I thought of where I wanted to go—to him.



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I thought of Forrest's low chuckle, his bright green eyes, and his intoxicating scent. I thought of the feel of his lips and the warmth of his embrace. I thought of him until I wasn't sure if my head was spinning from the violent water or just from him.

And then the whirlpool spat me out on a sand dune.

That was the last thing I remembered before I lost consciousness.

A man with black hair leaned over me, his green eyes alight with fear as he shook me. "Georgia, wake up. Georgia, please."

I moaned and blinked my eyes. I was icy cold, and I felt battered.

"Thank the tides," I heard him mutter.

He helped me into a sitting position and wrapped his cloak around my shoulders. I felt instantly warmer. I tried to stand, but I could no longer bear my own weight. I crumpled back to the ground.

He kneeled down to check on me and chuckled. "Little sparrow, there's no use flying in a hurricane. Just let the winds carry you."

He scooped me into his warm arms, and I looped mine around his neck. I felt such immense relief in that moment. He was here, I was here, and somehow we were both alive.

"I'm sorry I left," I said, looking up at him with hopeful eyes.

"I'm sorry I made you want to leave," he said, gazing down at me with his usual intensity. "I thought I would never see you again."

"I want to see you always," I said.

His mouth opened in surprise. "I want that too," he breathed.

I pressed my hand to his cheek and claimed his lips. There was nothing gentle or sweet about it. I parted his lips with my tongue, and he came alive against my mouth, meeting my passion with his own.

"Can I stay forever?" I asked.

"Just try to leave," he growled against my ear.

I shivered, and he wrapped his cloak tighter around me.

It reminded me of that very first night we met. When I emerged from the pond nearly naked. When he wrapped his traveling cloak around me. Oh, the delicious things that might have happened that night.

Things that could happen now.

He started kissing my neck, and I forgot we were even standing on a beach. I was snapped back to reality when I heard the deafening roar of a tree being uprooted.

He followed my eyes over to the tree. "Time to get you inside," he said.

I bit my lip. "What about the storm? Aren't you needed?"

"I've done all I can. All we can do now is wait," he said.

I wrapped my legs teasingly around his waist. "Then we should use our time wisely."

He looked at me hungrily. Then he paused. "You're not just doing this to stop the storm, are you? Out of some misguided self sacrifice."

I shook my head. "Of course not."

He studied me. "I want to be really clear about this. I don't know how to end my curse, and I don't know how to stop the unseelie. We have a plan in place, and we're giving it everything we've got, but-

"I want you, Forrest. If the island is going to sink below the waves, if my kingdom is to be turned to sand, if I must die, I would only wish to be in your arms."

He sucked in a sharp breath and whispered low in my ear, "Even if this storm destroys everything around us, I'll have you."

For once, his door was closing behind us. For the first time, I was truly on the inside. He wanted me here. He wanted me. Not just for today but for always.

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I looked around and saw his familiar mess of clothing and goblets. "Your room is a wreck," I laughed.

He raised his eyebrows and purred in my ear, "Let's wreck it some more."

He trailed hot kisses down my neck, and his fingers worked the laces of my gown. Soon, it fell to the floor, leaving me in only a thin chemise and stay. Slowly, his lips made their way down to my collarbone and sucked on the sensitive skin there, coaxing a low moan from my lips.

He sucked in a sharp breath at the sound and started working the laces of my stay with frenzied fingers. At last, it fell to the floor too.

One by one, I clumsily worked his wet garments from his body until they joined mine on the bedroom floor. Until we were completely bare before each other.

I drank in every last drop of him, in a way I had never allowed myself to before. I wanted to memorize every inch of him, from his silky black hair to his soulful eyes to his warm, hard chest to the delicious, soft flesh where his hips met his groin.

He seemed to feel the same way. His eyes moved over me in loving awe. "You're gorgeous, Georgia," he breathed.

I knew he couldn't lie, but even if he could, I would have chosen to believe him anyway. We had shared all of our secrets now, and we were prepared to share our lives. I was ready to close this distance between us.

"I-I've never done this before," I said softly.

He stopped. "Oh?"

"I've done things, but not, you know, this."

He nodded. "We can go as slow as you want or not at all. You know that, right?"

I nodded. "But Forrest?"

"Yeah," he mumbled, his lips on my neck.

"I don't want to go slow. I want to go fast. So fast."

He chuckled in my ear. "As you command, my queen. We shall go as slowly as fast as possible."

He pulled me to his chest, and I fell easily into his warmth. He tilted my chin up and captured my lips with his. I opened my mouth and welcomed him in.

Soon, we were a tangle on his silk sheets of exploring hands and eager kisses. He brought his lips from my neck down to my clavicle before reaching my breast. He sucked gently, and I moaned in pleasure.

The sound seemed to stir something within because I could hear his own breath quicken.

I traced my fingers across his chest and stomach until I reached delicate skin. I trailed my fingers right along where his waistband would have fallen.

Then I lowered my hand to caress his length, feeling him grow harder against my

fingertips.

He groaned. "Slow down," he said with a chuckle. "I want this to be good for you too."

I blushed.

"It's all really good for me," he assured me, nipping at my ear.

He ran his fingers along the silky smooth skin of my thighs agonizingly slowly until I ached for him to reach the apex. When he finally did, I sighed with pleasure. He explored my most intimate place, stroking and pressing until I was writhing against his hand.

I wanted all of him now. I pulled him to my chest until he was hovering over me, careful not to crush me with his full weight. I could feel his heart racing in time with my own.

I lifted my hips to meet his hardness.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I nodded and crushed my lips against his in answer.

I felt his heavy warmth against me, and he slowly entered. There was a small bite of pain as I adjusted to this feeling of fullness.

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He moved slowly until that bite of pain was replaced with a chaos of pleasure that left me aching for more. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him in deeper.

Our pace, our caresses, our kisses became more as our control melted away. I hardly knew where my body ended and his began. We were both at the brink of something amazing. Our hearts were beating as one.

He gazed deeply into my eyes, and I didn't need his words to know what he was saying. But he gave them to me anyway. "I love you."

With one more thrust, I was over the edge, and he was falling right after me.

He collapsed into the spot next to me, and I rolled into his warm embrace. "I love you, too," I whispered.

We fell asleep tangled in each other's arms.

The dark storm clouds parted just enough for a ray of faded sunlight to wake me.

I was laying on top of something uncomfortable. I shifted before realizing the thing I was laying on was Forrest's arm.

I looked up at the sky then back down at the sleeping man next to me. A jolt of pure joy shot through me.

"Forrest," I said, shaking him awake.

He sat up, and his eyes darted around the room. "What's the matter?"

"Absolutely nothing," I said with a huge grin. "You're... you."

For a split second, he seemed confused. Then his eyes roved down his body and our intertwined legs. His mouth dropped open, and his eyes widened in surprise. Then a slow smile spread across his lips, and his eyes lit up like the sun. "Georgia," he whispered in awe.

I pressed my body up against him. "I know," I breathed back.

"But how?" he whispered.

"Love?" I guessed. "Yours? Mine?"

"Ours," he rumbled.

Then he pulled me close and kissed me soundly.

When, at last, he broke the kiss, I groaned in protest.

Breathless, he said, "Little sparrow, I want to do so very many things with you, but first, I need to go kick some unseelie ass. I want you to wait right here in this bed. Promise you won't move?"

I hesitated, wanting desperately to go with him. Though I knew I would be in the way. I could jump into a whirlpool. I could cross the sea in a sailboat with magical aid. I could stand up to my father and older sister. I could bare my heart to him. But I wasn't a soldier. I had never been trained to wield a sword or elements.

"Please don't worry," he said softly. "Because of you, my curse is broken. I am more



than strong enough to defend my crown and court. This is my duty.”

I took a deep breath and nodded.

He dropped a kiss on the top of my head, and I watched him go.

I pulled the comforter tight around me until I was warm and cozy. I didn’t have to wait long before a bolt of lightning cracked open the sky. It was bigger and more powerful than any I had ever seen before. It had to be Forrest. A warning to the unseelie, perhaps.

Over the next couple of hours, I watched a war rage across the open skies. Swirls of dark clouds and pelting rain were replaced with blue-gray skies, only for thunder to rumble in the distance. The terrible dance continued.

Then the sky turned a brilliant blue, and the clouds became puffy and white. All was calm.

At last, the sun was ready to shine on a new day.

## CHAPTER 43

### The Fae King

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Once I was outside the castle doors, I unfurled my wings and flew to the beach. I had always been connected to the island, winds, and surf. With my curse lifted, that connection felt like a second heartbeat.

That connection told me where the Unseelie Queen would be waiting. I could feel her presence like a knot of darkness and sickness, poisoning the island itself. She wouldn't just harm the humans and seelie, she would destroy nature itself. Her court was chaos and malice personified.

I circled twice in the air before landing on the sand. She was just paces ahead, wrapped in a blanket of cold, wet mist and wearing her nasty crown of bones. I thought of how nearly she had added Georgia to that crown. I reached skyward and drew down a bolt of lightning.

She and her mist vanished and reappeared several paces away, narrowly avoiding the strike. I growled and threw another. Nothing. Another and another. Finally, one came so close that, for a brief moment, I saw her terrible face illuminated. A face no one outside of her royal court had seen in centuries. That was enough to frighten her.

Grudgingly, she inclined her head to me before vanishing.

This time, she did not reappear.

The seas began to calm, and the rain slowed.

I began to harness the sea breeze to blow away the dark, oppressive clouds she had left in her wake. The wind sprites fought back, not yet willing to admit defeat. I

continued to battle them for several minutes until a familiar voice called out.

“My king!”

I spotted the Captain of the Guard crossing over the sand dunes, his red cap bobbing up and down as he hurried toward me. He carried a net woven from gossamer and behind him was a team of red caps. “Need a hand with the sprites?” he asked.

I gratefully accepted, and the net was tossed into the sky. When it was full, it took six strong red caps to pull the sprites down and bind them.

I called another gust of sea breeze, and the sky was clear.

“Will you stick around and round up any stragglers?” I asked the Captain.

He nodded. “It would be my honor.”

I returned inside and ran down corridor after corridor, searching for any remaining sign of Hawthorne, the wretched snake. I checked his rooms, the council space, and even the library. As far as I could tell, he was gone, vanished to serve his mistress.

As I walked through the castle’s courtyard, I stared up at the bright sun and blue sky. It would take us days to round up dissidents and weeks to complete the repairs to the island itself, but the worst was over.

I knew the Unseelie Queen. She liked to strike in darkness when her prey was weak. She had never wanted a long or difficult fight. She wouldn’t return to the island unless the tides turned in her favor. For now, we were at peace.

“Forrest!” I heard someone shout.

I turned around and saw Rowan with his hands on his knees and his long beard trailing the ground as he leaned over to catch his breath.

I moved quickly to meet him. “Are you okay?”

He sucked in a few rasping breaths. “Better than. We’ve captured Hawthorne.”

I followed Rowan back to the Council Chambers. Inside, two of my spies were holding Hawthorne in the center of the room. His golden eyes were black, and he looked rabid. “Let me go, or you will regret it,” he hissed to the man and woman holding him.

“I think you are the one who will regret, Hawthorne,” I said.

As his eyes landed on me, the wind went out of his sails. “But it’s daylight. You can’t-”

“Oh, I can,” I said with a wicked smile. “You played a nasty little game, but you and your Dread Queen lost.”

“She won’t lose,” he growled.

“She’s already lost. She’s left the island, and it appears she left you behind.”

Hawthorne’s eyes widened, and for a moment, they glimmered back to pools of crestfallen gold.

“Your majesty, what should we do with him?” asked Rowan.

I thought for a moment. “Hold him somewhere secure. Let him stand trial with the rest of the captured. I doubt they’ll go easy on him. Personally, I hope never to set

eyes on him again.”

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Hawthorne was dragged from the room in chains of iron.

I returned to my bride-to-be.

### CHAPTER 44

The Fae King

### WEEKS LATER

I could hardly believe this day had come.

For years, I had never dreamed of finding love. I was a twice-cursed king. Who would ever want me? Now, my curse had been broken, my soul rot had vanished, the unseelie had been defeated, and a war with the humans averted.

My heart was whole.

Best of all, today, I would seal the most important bargain of my life... forever. My hands shook with nerves as I fiddled with the clasp on my cloak. It was almost time to head to the beach and my bride.

Harry clasped my cloak for me and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Not much longer," he assured me.

"I would willingly wait for her for a lifetime," I breathed.

He chuckled. "I know you would. I'm happy to see you smiling again. I'm glad you found each other—warts and all."

I gave him a concerned tilt of my head. Harry was always there for me, and I wanted happiness for him too. "And what of you, old friend? Is your curse broken too? Will you be able to find love?"

"Only time will tell," he said evenly.

I nodded. I hoped so too. Harry deserved love. "You know we're here to support you, too," I reminded him.

He clapped me on the back. "I never doubted it."

An hour later, I waited in the ocean with the waves gently lapping at my ankles. My eyes weren't fixed on the crowd of important wedding guests. They were trained on the sand dunes and sea oats, waiting for her to appear among them.

Waiting for my little sparrow to fly to her nest.

Because from now on, home for us would be each other.

## CHAPTER 45

### The Stolen Bride

It was my wedding day, and my heart was so full I feared it might burst. I always believed I would marry for duty, crown, and kingdom. Instead I was marrying the man I loved—a man I knew would save my life over and over again and would fight for us every day he took breath. I felt the same.

The unseelie had diminished. Thanks to Briar, my father had called off his attack. The Frost Haven soldiers had returned home. A beautiful, fragile peace existed in our world. But if there came a time where we would have to fight again, I would gladly do it by his side.

I was wearing my little sparrow dress, the one I had meant to wear to our engagement party. It was white with threads of silver moonlight embroidered in, a semi-sheer bodice, a flowing skirt, and soft white feathers adorning the low, sweetheart neckline. Wearing it made me happy.

My sisters carefully collected my skirts, and we proceeded down the castle stairs. Then we passed through the canopy of oaks that lined the walk and only stopped when we reached the sand dunes. Beyond, on the beach, Forrest and the rest of the wedding party waited.

"Are you ready?" Magnolia whispered to me, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

"Yes." I nodded. I was ready to see Forrest, to hold him in my arms and finally make him mine forever.

Briar caressed my cheek. "You're so beautiful. You'll be happy, won't you?"

"Immensely," I promised, wrapping my arms around her in a big hug. Magnolia joined on. We all stood there for a long moment.

We broke apart.



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"If he gets out of line, we can always turn him back into a frog," Magnolia threatened, wagging her eyebrows.

We all laughed, and I realized something.

Forrest was right. Grown-ups could laugh. And that moment I had longed for so desperately with my sisters was here. It was different than I had imagined, but it was even better because it was real.

I kicked off my shoes, lifted my train, and began my procession.

The beach was packed with our guests, including fae from every court. Of course, there were no humans in attendance other than my sisters. They had been invited, but it was just too soon.

I heard Briar gasp, "My stars."

I looked back at her, but she merely pointed ahead with wonder on her face.

As I gazed out over the water, my breath caught. Dozens and dozens of human ships were floating off the coast of the island. Closer than they had ever dared travel before. Closer than the fae had ever dared allow.

Bright colorful flags were being flown, and I could see people out on the deck, waving and smiling. I was so happy I could feel tears pricking the corner of my eyes.

Then I set my eyes forward. It was afternoon, and the sun was high in the sky, and I

could see my beloved waiting for me in the lapping shallow waves. He looked happy. His cheeks were fuller now, and his smile was genuine. He spotted me for the first time in my dress, and his eyes filled with mirth. "Little sparrow," he mouthed.

I blew him a kiss, and I could feel the faintest of sea breezes pulling it toward him. I smiled.

All of the music fell away, and only the violin continued as I made my way slowly down the sandy aisle to him. That walk defied time; seconds felt like a lifetime. I stepped into the shallowest part of the water, letting the little waves lap at my ankles.

When I reached him, our eyes locked for one intense moment. He took my hands in his, and my heart galloped. I could hardly believe he would finally be mine.

We both looked up at our officiant, Harry. We could have chosen someone more ancient or more esteemed, but we wanted Harry. We trusted him. Not only was he Forrest's oldest friend, he was our biggest supporter.

He blessed us and our marriage.

Then it was Forrest's turn to speak. "My love, as we stand here today, I am reminded of the incredible journey it took to get here. I promise to walk with you in sunshine and storms. Whatever life may bring. Georgia, I love you, and today, I offer you my hand, my heart, and my name."

He leaned close and breathed his true name in my ear, "Cian."

He pulled back, and I smiled up at him. Even in a fae marriage, true names were not always exchanged. It was the ultimate show of trust and love. It was a beautiful name and full of meaning. Cian meant "enduring."

Now it was my turn. I felt butterflies ignite in my stomach, speaking in front of so many people. But I took a deep breath and let them all fall away. I focused my eyes and heart on him until it felt as if we were alone on the beach.

"My beloved, today, I stand before you with all my heart. With you, I've found my home, my strength, and my joy. I promise to laugh with you in the sunshine and stand by you in storms. I love you now and always."

"And so you are bound," said Harry.

I waited for his kiss, but something unexpected happened. Silky, cool tendrils of seawater wrapped gently around my legs and then swirled around my body. I looked down and saw I was wearing a wedding dress made from the ocean's water.

I flashed Forrest a panicked look.

But he smiled softly. "The island has chosen you too."

I looked back at the crowd of fae spectators, and they were all bowing, curtsying, or kneeling... to me.

"My queen," he whispered before wrapping his arms around my waist and leaning down. My breath quickened in anticipation, and my lips parted easily for him. That kiss was electric. It was the pain of being apart and the joy of being together. It was filled with promises and dreams, a passionate vow of forever.

That kiss was everything.

## CHAPTER 46

### The Stolen Bride

EPILOGUE

### YEARS LATER

I rested my hands on the old worn dock and leaned back to bask in the warm rays of the sun. My quiet reverie was interrupted by my three small children running across the dock with their father in tow. I smiled up at them fondly.

They all have my sunkissed hair and their father's mischievous green eyes. All three of them had breakfast in their hair and on their shirts. So did Forrest for that matter. It looked like they had eggs, bacon, and grits from the tell-tale splatters.

He looked at me chagrined. "Breakfast took an unexpected turn."

I laughed. "As long as everyone is smiling."

My children hovered around me, and the youngest climbed into my lap. Then I was covered in breakfast too. "Momma! Momma!" he asked, his hopeful eyes gazing up at me. "Can we go in?"

The others chattered in anticipation of my answer.

I pretended to consider for a moment. "Did everyone bring clothes to swim in?" I teased.

"Momma," the oldest said with a groan and roll of his eyes.

The littlest in my lap transformed into a frog and hopped up and down. I kissed him on the top of his green head. All of the boys and Forrest could transform at will now.

Apparently, my mother's magic had a good sense of humor.

"Of course you may swim, my loves. Just don't stray too far from your father."

The other two boys transformed, and I couldn't help but laugh at the three of them bouncing up and down on the dock.

"Any more instructions, Momma?" Forrest asked.

"No stolen brides, boys," I said with a big grin and a shake of my finger.

Forrest snorted in laughter and kissed me on the top of my head. "I'd do it all again, you know."

"Me too, love," I said.

Then he transformed and joined our boys for a day of sunshine, swimming, and play.

And we all lived "hoppily" ever after.