



# The Rumples Gentleman

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** A Romantic Rumpelstiltskin Retelling Full of Magic, Mystery, and a Deal That Changes Everything

Elara Millstone never wanted a life of impossible bargains. But when her father, once a respected alchemist, claims he can change straw into gold, they find themselves trapped in a dangerous game with the powerful Duke of Sutton. If her father fails to deliver on his promise, imprisonment would be the least of their worries.

Desperate to save them, Elara makes a deal of her own with a mysterious masked gentleman who seems to hold the key to their survival. But magic and alchemy are not the only forces at play—secrets, deception, and an unexpected attraction makes things more precarious. As Elara works to outwit the ruthless duke, she begins to wonder: has she struck a bargain with a savior or merely exchanged one cage for another?

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

# Page 1

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## Chapter

### One

Hours after dawn, Elara climbed the staircase on tired feet. In her aching hands, she held a single Celandine bud, a flower promising joy to come. A flower that shouldn't have made her smile as it had, given that she no longer believed in its ability to bring such things to the one who held it. A flower she would've given to one of her sisters had she not sent them away to live with the relatives willing to take them in when her father first showed signs of falling apart.

She missed her sisters, dearly.

"Best not cry over it," she muttered to herself outside the door of the place she lived. Not home. Not ever quite home, no matter how she tried to make the little rooms her own.

Yet she hoped the flower would make her father happy when he saw the lovely star-shaped bloom of bright yellow.

The creaking hinges echoed faintly in the main room of the rented lodgings Elara shared with her father. She closed the door behind her with a soft click, her eyes taking in the familiar gloom of what she'd left behind. The room, serving both as a living area and her bedchamber, was illuminated by the dim morning light seeping through the cracked glass of the window.

She stepped across the wooden floorboards quietly. The cot, her bed, lay made as

neatly as she could manage in one corner. The warm but scratchy blankets served as a stark reminder of their reduced circumstances. On the other side of the room, the small iron stove radiated a meager warmth, the embers barely glowing.

“At least I needn’t light it again,” she whispered to the quiet chilled room.

Elara set about preparing a cup of watered-down coffee, the scent a small comfort in the otherwise bleak surroundings. Her thoughts were on her father and the state in which she’d left him. He’d been relatively calm the evening before and hadn’t woken when she’d left before dawn for her position as a florist’s assistant.

Amos Millstone, once a respected alchemist, was nothing like his former self. The tonic she had obtained was their only hope of bringing some semblance of normalcy to his troubled mind. The small, splintery table where they ate their meals had his notes scattered across the side where he usually sat. She drifted over, her hands itching to make order out of the chaos.

She didn’t touch them right away, though. She studied them first, barely able to make out her father’s hasty scrawl in the dimly lit room. It looked like formulas, again. Notes on chemicals and metals.

The scent of coffee pulled her from the papers without regrets. If she never saw another alchemical formula again, she’d be happy the rest of her days.

Cup in hand, she approached the door to the bedroom, pausing for a moment. Hoping she wouldn’t walk in to the usual scene of her father lost in his delusions.

She pushed the door open. “Good morning, Papa. I have some coffee for you?—”

The room was empty, the bed unmade.

Panic rose in her throat. “Papa?”

The silence pressed upon her, unlike the usual sounds emanating from this room, his murmurs and restless movements.

Her eyes darted around the small chamber. The realization that he was not there, that he had somehow slipped away without her, sent a surge of fear through her.

Where could he have gone? And in what state of mind?

Setting the coffee aside, she hurried back into the main room, her eyes sweeping from one wall to another for any clue of his whereabouts. But the room offered no answers, only the stark reality of their life—the cot, the stove, the open, battered trunk holding the few belongings that spoke of their fall from a former place of pride.

Wait. Open? She’d not left it open.

Elara went to the trunk, taking in the pieces of the past. She realized at once what was missing. Her father’s old top hat and his alchemy notebook. The one he swore held the answers to turning worthless materials from their natural state into gold.

She rushed back to his room. There had to be something else. Something more.

She tossed the bedclothes onto the floor, then looked beneath the mattress, and finally saw a bit of newspaper spread out.

She snatched it up and read through the smudged dirt and ink on the old ivory-colored paper.

Advertisements for hair tonic, country estates, and bills for theatricals were all she found. Until she came across one dreaded word: Gold .

“Oh, no.”

The Duke of Sutton has returned to London for the Parliamentary Season, claiming greater understanding of the Magic and Alchemic Reasoning needed for the transformation of Baser Metals into Gold.

She squeezed her eyes closed. Should she rush to the Houses of Parliament? Would he have gone there? She looked at the paper again, the text blurring until she blinked back her exhaustion. The announcement of the duke’s return mentioned his address.

Friends of His Grace may call upon his Family at Number 10 Mayfair.

Elara’s thoughts turned frantic. She needed to find him, to bring him back to the safety of their home, such as it was. She grabbed her cloak, throwing it around her shoulders, and departed into the unfriendly fog of a London morning.

They lived at the edge of St. Giles, not in the Rookery proper but close enough that she had learned, for her safety, to blend into the shadows and avoid being seen coming and going from her home.

Her breath formed little puffs of mist as she quickened her pace, her mind racing with worry. The streets of St. Giles, though quieter at this early hour, still held an air of menace.

The distance to the duke’s residence was not insubstantial, especially on foot, but she couldn’t afford any other mode of transportation. Her only option was to walk, to push through the fatigue and fear that threatened to overwhelm her.

Reaching Mayfair, the elegant townhouses and well-dressed inhabitants were a world away from her own life. She tried to make herself as inconspicuous as possible, keeping to the edge of the pavement, her gaze fixed ahead.

Number 10 loomed before her, its grand facade intimidating. She hesitated, uncertainty gripping her. Could her father really be here, drawn by some deluded hope sparked by the duke's announcement?

Steeling herself, Elara approached the house. The imposing entrance, suited for the nobility and their esteemed guests, was not for her. She skirted around the side, her steps leading her to the lower door—the servants' entrance.

Taking a deep breath, Elara rang the bell. The jingle seemed to echo into the stairwell and out into the avenue above. She waited, her mind racing with thoughts of her father wandering aimlessly through the streets, or worse, speaking of alchemical dreams to the powerful man within the house's walls.

The door opened, and a maid peered out. She had whiskers and ears that peeped out of her cap, pointed and furred like a cat. She was Fey.

“Yes? Have you a delivery?” She eyed Elara's modest attire.

“I'm looking for my father, Amos Millstone,” Elara said quickly, her voice steady despite her anxiety. “He's not well, and I have reason to believe he came this way. Searching out an audience with someone in this household.”

The maid's expression softened, and her whiskers twitched in sympathy. “My grandad wanders off now and again. Puts my mother in a right state. You'd better come in. The whole house is in fits with the masquerade tonight. But per'aps someone will know if he's here.”

Elara stepped inside, the warmth of the kitchens enveloping her immediately. It would've been a welcome change from the cold were it not for the circumstances that had brought her there.

She needed to find her father before his condition exposed him to ridicule—or worse.

“We’d best find someone who works upstairs to ask,” the maid said with a wince. “Chef’s not likely to pause for breath anytime soon.”

The kitchen staff were in a frenzy, buzzing about like hornets after having had their nest knocked out of a tree. Shouted orders came from a man dressed in a flour-dusted apron. A footman rushed into the kitchen as Elara’s guide maneuvered them toward the door.

“You’re wanted to make up a new guest chamber, so there’s no time to have tea with your friend. The Missus and Garrick have us all working with their whips at our backs as is.”

“Another guestroom?” The maid’s cry was forlorn. “It’s too short notice?—”

“You going to tell His Grace that?” the man snarled back. “None of us will sleep tonight or the next. Get rid of the girl.” He jerked his chin toward Elara. “Get to the guest wing.”

The maid looked at Elara with wide eyes. “I’m sorry, Miss...?”

“Millstone.” She took a step backward. “It’s all right. I understand. He mustn’t have come this way.” Her father’s state always grew worse when he was overwhelmed by noise and people. One moment belowstairs in a house like this would have been a horror to him.

The footman gave her a look of shock. “Millstone? Did you say your name was Millstone? ”

“Yes.” The reaction was too sudden, and her heart had already dropped deep into the

pit of her stomach before the man's expression turned to one of pity.

"Are you here with Mr. Amos Millstone?"

Anxiety shot through her like a thousand tiny thorns. "He's my father. He left our house today without me. Has he been here?"

His brows lowered.

"I need to find him. Please. Did you send him away already?" Elara asked, her hands clutching at her skirts.

"He is in guest quarters," the footman said, tone no longer annoyed but more formal. "Allow me to show you to his room."

Dread twisted and turned in her stomach. Annoying a duke could result in terrible things, she well knew. Especially this duke.

She followed the footman through the narrow corridors that ran like veins beneath the grandeur of the house, with servants jostling them until they gained the upper floors. In the labyrinth of the duke's residence, the weight of their fall from grace pressed upon her more acutely than ever. But the need to protect her father overshadowed all else.

The flower that had tumbled into her hand from the back of a delivery wagon hadn't been an omen of good things to come after all. Its joyful yellow petals made a mockery of her life. The Celandine was yet another lie, promising beauty and happiness but leaving her with nothing but wilted hopes.

"Oh, Papa. What have you done?" And how would she get them both out of this predicament?



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:05 am*

### Chapter

### Two

A summons from the Duke of Sutton always set a knot of apprehension in Orion's stomach. He stood rigidly outside his father's study, steeling himself, and knocked firmly.

"Enter." Even that single word in the duke's voice made Orion shudder.

Pushing the door open, Orion stepped into the study, a room that always seemed as cold and uninviting as the man who occupied it.

The duke's sharp gaze lifted from the papers on his desk to meet Orion's. "Fitzmartin. Here you are." His voice dripped with a familiar mixture of condescension and feigned warmth. "I have something of interest to discuss with you."

After delivering the customary bow, Orion remained standing, his posture formal. "Your Grace."

The duke's fingers curled into his palm. His smile turned sly. "An apothecary, a peculiar man, claims he has found a way to transmute living objects into gold. Flowers and grasses, to be precise. His preliminary findings are compelling." He nodded to a book and stack of papers upon his desk.

Orion raised an eyebrow, skepticism immediately warring with his own findings from

intense study of transmutation. “Turning flora into gold? That seems improbable.”

The duke’s eyes narrowed, a flash of irritation crossing his features. “Regardless, I have decided to let him try. The potential is too great to ignore. Perhaps the secret isn’t in turning a baser metal to something pure, but to take another aspect of nature and transform it.”

Orion knew all too well his father’s ruthless ambition to obtain even greater wealth and power. “And if this apothecary fails to deliver on his bold claims?”

The duke’s lips curled disdainfully. “You know how I handle those who waste my time. Besides, he brings more to me than mere theory. He has a daughter gifted in natural magic. Relating to flora, specifically. I doubt he would risk his child’s life if he could not deliver on his promise. If they disappoint me, both will be dealt with accordingly.”

The implicit threat hung heavy in the air. When the Duke of Sutton “dealt with” those who fell short of his expectations, it was never pleasant. Any number of grim fates awaited the duke’s enemies. The apothecary’s life, and his child’s, hung in the balance over an impossible feat.

“What have I to do with any of this?” Orion asked, his voice carefully neutral.

“You?” the duke replied with a sharpened edge to his tone, “I want you to witness this. To see what real alchemical prowess might achieve. Perhaps it will inspire you to something other than your usual fruitless tinkering.”

Orion clenched his jaw. His own research and experiments, driven by a genuine desire to improve the world, were nothing but a waste of time and resources in the duke’s eyes. It was a very good thing the nobleman didn’t know about Orion’s latest pursuits, nor how close he was to a breakthrough.

If he could rid mankind of its need for coal as fuel, rid England and the rest of the industrial world of the putrid air and filthy output of factories, he would also cause financial distress for every man who had holdings in coal mining and dozens of related industries. Men like the duke.

“I see.” Orion kept his voice even. “Where is this genius of alchemy?”

“In the guest wing,” the duke answered with a wave of his hand. “Trot along and meet him, if you wish. His daughter has been sent for, too. Speak to them. Take notes. It might prove enlightening.”

With a curt nod, Orion turned to leave the study.

“Oh, and one more thing. You are coming to the masquerade this evening.”

Orion looked over his shoulder. “I wasn’t aware I was invited.” He’d heard of the ball the week prior, but the lack of invitation had given him leave to relax somewhat.

“Of course not. I made the decision not an hour ago. You will attend. Dressed appropriately.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.” He bowed one more time and left the study.

The prospect of witnessing another man’s life crushed under the duke’s unyielding ambition weighed heavily on him.

A harried-looking footman in the guest wing gave Orion the precise location of the apothecary and informed him that the man’s daughter had also arrived.

He came to the room to which the footman directed him and raised his hand to knock—but hesitated when he heard a raised, feminine voice from within.

“Don’t you see what you’ve done, Papa? The duke will not forgive this—and you told him about me? Why? Why would you do this to us?” Desperation and tears dripped from the final question.

Something was terribly wrong. He knocked and opened the door without waiting for the answer. Then froze at the scene inside.

A man stood in the center of the room with his back to the door, dressed in clothes once fine but now frayed, hands clasped behind his back and head bent. But it wasn’t his shamed demeanor that arrested Orion’s attention. It was the woman kneeling in front of him.

When the duke had mentioned that the apothecary had a daughter, Orion had pictured someone much, much younger than the woman who had crumpled to a kneeling position on the floor. A woman whose beauty couldn’t be diminished by the drab clothing she wore. Not with a face so expressive that it made his heart break to see tears upon it.

She hadn’t realized he’d entered, staring as she was up at her father with tears streaming down her cheeks. They hadn’t heard his knock, it seemed. And he’d walked in on a tableau that made his heart crack.

He cleared his throat.

The woman bolted up to her feet before her father fully turned around. Her gaze collided with his, full of fear. “Please, sir. Please, won’t you take me to His Grace? There’s been a mistake.”

“What sort of mistake?” he asked, coming far enough into the room to shut the door behind him. “Are you this man’s daughter?” What was the name his father had given? “Mr. Millstone?”

The man turned, his eyes wide and confused. “I am Amos Millstone. This is my daughter. We are the duke’s guests. We’re supposed to be here.”

“Papa, please.” She put her hand on his arm with gentleness. “We shouldn’t be here. Even if the duke said to stay.” She looked at Orion again, her expression now pleading. “My father is confused, sir. He didn’t mean to mislead the duke. This is all a mistake. I would like to take my father home now. If you will show us out?—”

Orion slowly shook his head. “You cannot leave here without the duke’s permission.” He looked at Mr. Millstone, whose gaze had turned unfocused. The man tugged at his waistcoat, and his lips moved a moment in silence before he spoke aloud.

“I am an apothecary. The finest in London.” He didn’t sound certain of either statement. They were almost questions.

“Yes, Papa.” The woman patted his arm. “You are a fine apothecary. Everyone knows it.” She gave Orion a beseeching look before again directing her words to her father. “Here. Sit down a moment. Let me talk to this...gentleman?” She glanced at Orion again, perhaps at last noting he wasn’t dressed in the livery of his father’s household.

He nodded once and watched as she led her father to a chair near the fire. She wiped at the tear tracks on her cheeks as she took rapid steps to Orion’s side. “Forgive me, Mr....?”

“Fitzmartin. Orion Fitzmartin.” He raised his eyebrows and bent his head slightly forward, waiting for her name. Or for her to realize what his surname meant— Fitz was enough of a tell for most to recognize a tie to nobility, if not to the Duke of Sutton himself. Even his name marked him as something shameful. An illegitimate son of a man with power.

She tilted her chin up and offered her full name in return. “Elara Millstone.”

“Miss Millstone. What sort of misunderstanding has occurred?”

He feared he already knew.

“My father gets confused.” She kept her voice low as she glanced over her shoulder at Mr. Millstone. “He used to keep an apothecary and was well-respected in his guild. Then my mother died, and he hasn’t been the same since. He dabbles in alchemy. Makes notes and calculations. He hasn’t done any experiments in over a year.” Her voice trembled as she continued. “I promise, he didn’t mean to mislead anyone. Especially not someone like His Grace. My father is not well. That is all.”

Orion’s heart sank, and he acted on instinct alone when he took one of her hands in both of his. Her hands were delicate, finely boned but not soft. They were chapped from the cold, and when he looked down at them, he saw smudges of green around her nails.

What sort of work had the woman taken up to support her father?

“Your father arrived here making claims of alchemical achievements to the Duke of Sutton. His Grace believes your father can turn flora to gold.”

Her hand gripped his, desperately. “No one can do that,” she whispered. “Surely, His Grace is a reasonable man. If I explain?—”

Orion slowly shook his head. “I am afraid that the Duke of Sutton is not reasonable. Not when it comes to alchemy.” He needed her to understand. “I have seen him try everything to create gold from baser materials. If you go to him now and tell him what you told me, he will send your father to an asylum. Or worse, have him executed for attempting to defraud a peer of the realm.”

Her face paled to a ghostly shade of white. “If I explain?—”

He shook his head, and she pressed her lips closed. “The duke will not care, Miss Millstone. And you will suffer the same fate as your father. I’ve seen it before. He is petty in his annoyance. And that is all this would be to him. An annoyance.”

She stared at him, her lips barely moving as she tried one last time to save them both. “Then let us leave, now.”

Again, he had to shake his head. “The servants will not let you out. Their positions depend upon it. There will be footmen watching you. Perhaps even a guard beneath the window. And the duke will not be mocked, Miss Millstone. Even if you made it out, he would send someone after you.”

“We haven’t done anything,” she insisted, voice cracking.

“It doesn’t matter.” Orion shook his head. “I have been trying to escape his grasp for years, Miss Millstone. And I know him better than anyone.”

Her brow furrowed. “Why are you telling me all of this? Who are you? Why are you here?”

He winced. “I am the duke’s only son. Illegitimately born of a woman who was as much a victim of his wealth and power as anyone. As your father will be.”

She snatched her hands away from him, her eyes widening.

Everyone knew the Duke of Sutton had no legal heirs. Even Elara, far from his rung on the social ladder, knew the stories of his anger that his wife hadn’t given him children. But she’d come from a powerful Hungarian family, so he hadn’t dared put her aside, according to rumor.

If the duke's own son, legally recognized or not, thought her plight hopeless, she was in worse straits than she'd suspected.

Elara studied the handsome man before her, taking in the gentleness in his eyes that she'd hoped meant ally-ship. Now she suspected it was only pity.

She looked at her father, anxious as to how much he might've heard. If he'd come out of his fog again, their situation might send him into a worse state. However, his chin rested against his chest, his eyes were closed, and he slept. Likely worn out from his sojourn through the streets of London.

At least she'd found him. He hadn't been hurt. He wasn't lost. That counted for a great deal. Her tired heart would've shattered entirely if she'd lost him. How would she have told her sisters?

She took in a deep breath, pleased her hands had stopped shaking. Another victory, small as it was.

"My father has made mistakes before," she said quietly, as much to herself as to Mr. Fitzmartin. "And I have always found a way out of them. He once bargained with a bookseller for thirty-seven volumes of poetry to be delivered to our home." She smiled at the memory. "They were worth more than three years' wages. I managed to keep us out of debtors' prison then. I can keep us from harm now, too."

Mr. Fitzmartin didn't appear convinced, but she wouldn't let his pessimism hurt her. She squared her shoulders.

"My father's notes. Where are they?"

He shook his head. "You cannot wish to try to make gold out of weeds, can you?"



“I have to try something.” She forced herself to smile even as the thoughts within her mind began to unfurl. “This is the first step. Please have his notes returned to us. I will prepare a list of supplies.”

She needed to buy them time. There was always a solution, if she had long enough to think things through. That was how she’d managed to sell those volumes of poetry to pay her father’s debt to the bookseller. With interest. That was how she’d negotiated enough food to keep them healthy, not merely alive. How she’d talked herself into a position with a florist and had her less-than-enthusiastic relatives take her sisters in so they could live away from the pollution of London while she earned enough money to support them.

The man stared at her a moment, his expression changing from one of pity to something else. Something akin to admiration. Perhaps he thought her foolhardy. It didn’t matter. Even a duke’s by-blow would have lived a better life than she had of late. He didn’t know what desperation drove a person to accomplish.

“Where can I find pen and paper to write out my list of needs?”

“The desk.” He nodded to a small writing desk and chair in the corner. “The duke will return the notebook. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“My father will have more papers and notes where we stay.” She rattled off an address, and he nodded.

“I will see to your father’s papers myself.”

“Good. Thank you. And if you would have someone bring up a tray for my father, please. He hasn’t eaten yet today.” Neither had she. But food was the last of her concerns.

Mr. Fitzmartin bowed. A proper bow, too. The sort no one had given her in...well. She couldn't remember when. His eyes remained guarded behind the spectacles he wore. "As you wish, Miss Millstone. Good day to you. And good luck."

"Thank you." She turned away from him, her heart already beating faster with fear and fortitude. She needed luck. She needed a fairy godmother. But only princesses and princes were worthy of such notice from fairy-folk.

No help was coming. She'd have to rely on herself.

Like always.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:05 am*

### Chapter

### Three

Elara had several sheets of paper filled with lists of things she needed, based on her father's notes and her desire to escape the situation unscathed. There were the usual ingredients of potions, of course, and items such as beakers and funnels and measuring tools. But she'd seeded the lists with other things, too. Things more in keeping with her limited use of magic. Flower seeds, nettles, vines.

The right mix of flowers and magical intent had saved her in the past. Though she hadn't any solid plan at the moment, she would come up with something.

A knock on the door preceded the entrance of the maid who'd let her in the kitchens. Her father currently slept in the bed in the next room, and Elara had insisted on remaining with him as much as possible. Two irritable footmen had brought a cot into the room and put it against the wall for her.

"Miss?" The maid carried a swath of teal fabric and pink tulle over her arm. "I have your gown for the ball."

Elara shook her head. None of those words made any sense to her. "I haven't any gowns?" The statement escaped in the form of a question. She looked down at the desk, her hands splayed across a sheet of paper, fingertips ink-stained. "I think both of us are over-tired, Bess. I'm not going to the duke's masquerade."

"His Grace says you are." Bess came into the room fully, closing the door behind her

with a bump of her hip. “The duke has given orders. We had a mad rush to find you a costume, and then someone suggested one of the duchess’s old things. If we put a little enchantment on your hair, we can say you are Cupid’s Countess, or some such thing.”

She didn’t have time for a ball. Not when she had to come up with a way to either turn worthless weeds into gold or delay the duke long enough to form a plan of escape.

Escape. The ball might help her plan that out, granting her leave to move about more freely in the duke’s home.

Immediately, she relented. “My father is still resting. He is not expected to attend, is he?”

The maid glanced at the connecting door from sitting room to bedchamber. “I was not given instructions to see to him, miss.”

Relaxing, she gave herself over to preparations for the ball. The maid, sweet as she was, kept up a constant stream of soft chatter, laced with information for Elara to absorb. The schedule for the evening, the usual expectations at such events, the sorts of dances performed. As Elara sat in front of the mirror at the small dressing table, her hair magicked to match the pink of her gown, she listened intently.

“And never reveal your identity, not to anyone,” the maid added. “The duke thinks it amusing for folk to stay in character. He gives prizes for those who best perform in their costume.” She winced. “Sometimes, High Fey attend. So be careful not to agree to anything, be it simple or strange.”

“You are Fey,” Elara observed softly, meeting Bess’s eyes in the mirror. “Should I be worried about you?”

Bess smiled and wiggled the tips of her catlike ears. “My gram was a Welsh Bwbachod . I inherited a fair few of her abilities, including her good looks.” She winked and her short cat whiskers rose with her grin. “Our kind aligns closely with humans, as we find joy in the tasks of keeping house and home. Some High Fey think it’s demeaning, so they don’t like associating with us. Unless it’s to cause mischief. Did you never learn these things? You speak as though you’re a lady, but you came to us looking like a servant.”

Elara shook her head, slowly. “My father belonged to the apothecary guild, and his shop was one of the finest in London. We had servants, but they were human. I only met Fey in passing.”

Bess gave a nod. “Be extra careful tonight. Make no bargains. Especially with the High Fey. They will promise you the moon but ask for your eyes in return.”

Elara blinked. “What does that mean?”

The maid’s expression turned sad. “What use is something as beautiful as the moon if you haven’t the eyes to see it?”

Elara swallowed and nodded her understanding.

“No deals with fairies. I understand.”

Bess gave a smart nod, then motioned to the bracelet on Elara’s wrist. “Do you want that above or beneath your glove, miss?”

The glass beads, blue and white, were as out of place as she was in this grand house. But she couldn’t bear to leave them behind. “Beneath, I think.”

She’d still have her sisters with her that way. Even if she kept them hidden.

Plotting her escape and avoiding the duke's magical guests at the same time might be more difficult than she anticipated. But what choice did she have?

Orion hated playing his father's games. The duke's demand that Orion attend the ball, last-minute and delivered with expectation, was a reminder of his power. Orion depended on the duke's goodwill for everything. For his mother's health. For their livelihood. Until Orion gained complete independence, financially and through influence, he had to bow to the villain's every demand.

Without worrying his mother.

If the opportunity arose, he would slip away to check on his father's captive guests, the woman and her father. After collecting her father's books, seeing where they lived, he'd thought of nothing else but her predicament. Which had made his own work suffer.

Tonight, he dressed the part of an Elf Huntsman. He wore a deep gray cloak, embroidered along its edges with silver vines, the hood up to cover the dark curling hair that would give him away to those who knew him best. Black made up the rest of his costume, except for the waistcoat that matched the cloak in color and design. Before he left his carriage, he donned the mask he'd chosen for the evening. It covered everything except his mouth, obscuring his identity entirely.

He had little desire to mingle with his father's friends, or for others to know how often the duke forced his illegitimate son to heel.

Light flooded outward from every window of the duke's enormous house, a show of extravagance and wealth that made Orion wince. Everywhere he looked, Orion saw wealth on display in extravagant costumes. Humans mingled freely with elves, fauns, fairies, and other fair-folk. Some were dressed as figures from the past, others as the embodiments of virtues or vices.

His father's closest associates were easy to spot, ringed around the duke as they were near the entrance to the ballroom. The duke himself wasn't masked. He wore well-tailored evening attire, his stickpin a diamond in the jaws of an intricately designed golden dragon. He smirked coolly, looking over the assembled guests with a gleam in his eye that made Orion hold back a shudder.

The man's greed for gold was only matched by his hunger for power.

Orion slipped into the ballroom with a crowd of guests, avoiding the duke's notice. He would have to make himself known at some point, to prove he'd fulfilled his obligation to attend, but it needn't be so early that his father could then command his steps for the whole of the evening.

He stayed at the edges of the ballroom, exchanging polite nods with those who met his gaze through his mask.

He debated dancing to pass the time but caught sight of a person in teal ruffles and pink lace, wearing a wig tinted to match her gown, dressed in a style popular before his birth.

She looked like a French noblewoman, direct from Napoleon's court. England's Regency era, before the Mad King had passed his crown to the impatient prince. Her mask, held in place by a thin silver ribbon, wouldn't be enough to hide her identity. Not from him. Especially when he saw her somewhat wide-eyed glance over her shoulder before she stepped through the doors to the gardens, out into the night.

Elara Millstone.

Why had the duke allowed her to attend the ball? Or forced her to attend, as was more likely the case. Did she hope to escape through the gardens? Surely she wouldn't, not after his earlier warnings. And she wouldn't leave her father behind, either. No,

escape wasn't what she had planned.

There was something amiss, and he intended to find out what.

He followed as Elara slipped out into the cool embrace of the night, careful to maintain a discreet distance. The soft glow of moonlight bathed the elaborate maze of hedges and flowers in silvery-blue light. Orion kept to the shadows of the garden.

Few people walked along the well-lit paths nearest the ballroom doors. Elara ignored them and ventured deeper into the darkness. He kept his quarry in sight, observing her every move with keen interest.

She wandered along the paths with a sense of purpose, her gaze fixed on the various blooms that adorned the garden. Orion admired the careful way she moved, her attention to detail, the way she paused to consider each flower before moving on.

At one point, she stopped before a bush adorned with delicate blossoms. Orion watched from behind a marble statue as she reached into a small bag tied to her wrist and produced a pair of scissors. With a precise and delicate motion, she clipped a single flower, inspecting it closely.

Her actions intrigued him. Was she gathering these flowers for a specific purpose? To create something to cheer her father, perhaps?

She moved silently and he acted as her shadow. The farther they ventured, the more secluded and wilder the garden appeared. Here, the carefully manicured flowerbeds gave way to denser foliage and less-trodden paths. The scent of earth and growing things filled the air.

Elara paused occasionally, selecting certain flowers or leaves, occasionally clipping a piece and arranging it carefully in her hands.



Orion's curiosity deepened.

He heard a shuffled step on the walk nearby, the murmur of male voices. Elara must have, too. She stiffened where she stood and glanced about, as if for a place to hide. A lone woman ought to be safe everywhere, but depending on who stumbled upon her, she was in as much danger in the gardens as on the streets of London.

Orion didn't hesitate. He swept out of the shadows and heard Elara's soft gasp as she turned toward him, eyes wide behind her mask. He didn't pause to explain, merely wrapped his cloak halfway about her shoulder as his hand went to the middle of her back to steady her, as if he meant to guide her through a waltz.

"Hush now," he commanded, his voice a whisper. "You mustn't be caught thieving flowers from a duke."

Her body, tightly coiled, trembled beneath his touch.

The owners of the voices came into their secluded alcove. They raised a lantern, and Orion looked over his shoulder with all the arrogance he could muster. Voice deep and commanding, he snarled, "What do you want?"

The men, dressed in the duke's livery, patrolled the grounds.

Elara ducked her head closer, her forehead brushing his cravat and the hair of her wig tickling his chin.

"Keeping the gardens safe, sir," one of them answered, raising the lamp higher. Noting Orion wasn't alone.

"I am safe enough. Away with you both." He didn't have the ability to persuade or command with his voice. Not a magical ability, at any rate. But he had the duke as his

example, and when he pitched his voice just right, he sounded as coldly authoritative as his sire.

“Sorry, sir. Didn’t mean to interrupt, sir.” The servants backed away, taking their lamp with them.

Orion stood still and silent until their footfalls faded away. Then he stepped back enough to look down at the woman he’d shielded from view.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “Whoever you are. I didn’t think of what would happen if someone accused me of theft. They are flowers—but rare and valuable. I should have considered that possibility.”

He shook his head at her explanation. “A simple mistake. But the consequences could have been dire.” She didn’t know who he was. His mask and hood, his change of posture and voice, assured that she wouldn’t. He opened his mouth to identify himself.

“Are you Fey?” she asked suddenly. “I have little experience with Fair Folk. Please forgive me if there is a thing I ought to do and haven’t yet done. I assume a curtsy is in order, at the least.” Immediately, she dropped into a charming curtsy more fit for a prince than for Orion.

He shifted uncomfortably but considered his options for a moment. If she didn’t know who he was, if she saw him only as a rescuer, he might gain more information than he had when he’d spoken to her before. She didn’t want to speak to the duke’s offspring, illegitimate or not, but she might be freer with a stranger.

He didn’t clear his throat. Better to keep his tone low, his voice dry. “What warning did you receive?”

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### Chapter

### Four

In the soft moonlight dancing upon the garden foliage, Elara gazed up at the mysterious figure who had saved her from potential disaster. His question hovered in the air, waiting for her answer.

“I was told to never make a deal with High Fey,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper, still unsure of the true nature of her savior. “That it could lead to consequences far beyond my understanding.”

“That is wise advice,” the man replied, his voice low and measured, giving her no hint of his identity. Yet he seemed oddly familiar. “Deals with the Fey often come at too high a price.”

Elara’s fingertips went cold, and she tightened her hold on the stems in her hand. “I’m grateful for your intervention. I wasn’t thinking about the implications of taking flowers from these gardens.”

He looked at her from behind his mask with an unnerving intensity. “It’s also dangerous to express gratitude to the Fey.” He sounded severe. “Why were you collecting these blossoms? What purpose could they serve you?”

She hesitated, debating how much to reveal, but his protective presence and the intelligence in his eyes encouraged her. “I’m gathering a bouquet to present to the duke. I hope to ask for his leniency and patience.”

His lips turned downward beneath his mask. “Leniency? From the Duke of Sutton?”

Elara sighed, a sense of resignation washing over her. This man already held her fate in his hands, were he to take the story of her garden theft to her captor. “My father and I are in a precarious situation. He’s not well, consumed by memories of his past. He presented himself to the duke, claiming he could transmute flora into gold. I fear the consequences when we fail to prove his claims.”

The man remained silent for a moment, seemingly to consider her words. “That is indeed a grave situation.”

“Yes,” Elara agreed, her voice weak with worry. “Hence my attempt to gather these flowers. If I can enhance them with a touch of magic, just enough to encourage patience, perhaps it will buy us time to find another way out of this predicament.”

He considered her words, his posture reflecting a contemplative stance. “You have magic, then? The ability to influence through plants?”

“A modest talent,” she admitted, feeling suddenly vulnerable at having revealed this much to a stranger. “I’ve used it before, to help in small ways. Never for something this significant.”

He nodded slowly, as if weighing her words. “It seems you are in dire circumstances indeed. And in need of aid.”

Elara couldn’t help but feel a flicker of hope at his words. “Do you have any advice? Any knowledge of how to navigate this treacherous situation?”

He paused, his gaze lingering on her with an unreadable expression. “I may not have immediate solutions, but I understand. Be cautious in your actions. Your approach must be clever and well-conceived.”

A sad, weak laugh escaped her lips. It wasn't the answer she'd hoped for. "Good advice. But that hardly helps matters. Perhaps it would be better to make a deal with a Fey, if there are any at this ball who would show my situation even the smallest measure of compassion."

The stranger turned still as stone and looked like a statue in the silvery moonlight, except for his eyes. They flashed, gleaming in the darkness, as he stared at her. "You would risk it? Even after being warned of what such a deal could mean?"

"I would. I see no other way. I know nothing of alchemy, and my father is in no state to contribute to the work beyond making endless notes. My only ability lies in plants, and I cannot imagine how to make gold from green and growing things."

Her rescuer spoke in his dark, low voice. "I'll help you. If you want to make a deal."

Unable to see his ears, or anything else that might give away his ancestry, she didn't know if he was Fey. And she didn't care. She was desperate. He knew it, too.

"What sort of deal? I have little to offer in exchange for whatever magic can accomplish what I need."

"Magical deals rarely work on the basis of monetary value." The stranger's gaze seemed to pierce through the shadows, focusing intently on her. "It must be something of value to you. Something that belongs to you, freely and absolutely."

Elara's mind raced. She had so little of material worth, but then it dawned on her—the one item she held dear, a connection to a past filled with love and warmth. She'd already removed her gloves to skulk about the garden, not wishing to stain the fingers green.

"This is my most treasured possession." She held her arm toward him, turning it to

reveal the simple brass clasp that kept it secure about her wrist. “My sisters made it for me. As a parting gift.”

The stranger observed the trinket, the moonlight glinting off the delicate glass beads. There was a moment of silence, a heavy pause where the air itself had stilled.

“I accept your offer,” he finally said, voice surprisingly gentle. “This bracelet, in exchange for my assistance.”

Elara hesitated for a moment, the weight of her decision pressing down on her. Yet, the necessity of her current situation left her with no other choice.

“Could you—? It’s difficult. To unclasp it. I bent the catch not long ago. Would you please remove it for me?” Her cheeks burned as she asked, holding her wrist up higher.

He removed his gloves, tucking them away in his cloak, then one of his hands—larger, warmer than hers—slid beneath her wrist and turned it, his touch gentle and feather-light. Then he carefully undid the clasp, his fingertips brushing the sensitive skin of her arm. The beads slid across her wrist as he took the only physical reminder she had of her sisters.

Handing it over felt like letting go of a part of herself. But the safety of her father and their future hung in the balance, as well as that of her sisters, who were dependent upon the funds she sent to keep the goodwill of their reluctant kin.

Elara looked up into the stranger’s obscured face, searching for some assurance she hadn’t made a grave mistake.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I hope this will be enough.”

The stranger nodded solemnly. "I will do everything within my power to aid you." He bent closer to her. "I promise."

As he tucked the bracelet into his cloak, Elara felt a chapter of her life close and an uncertain new one begin. She had made a deal that might change her fate forever, and the weight of it settled around her like a snow-sodden cloak.

### Chapter

### Five

Madness. Orion had succumbed to absolute madness.

After he'd shown Elara a servants' door for her to return to her rooms with her stolen flowers, he'd gone back to the ball. He still had to keep up appearances. Inwardly, he cursed himself.

He'd all but pretended to be a High Fey, someone capable of wielding great magic, of changing fortunes, all because a woman's heartbreak had shown so clearly in her eyes. Not even the High Fey could do what the duke wanted. Orion knew well enough that the Duke of Sutton had spent decades searching through magical tomes and relics to find such secrets. They didn't exist.

How would he fulfill his promise to Elara? There was a chance he could help her escape. And her father, too. But to what end? The duke would hunt them down and punish them for making him look like a fool.

Elara needed protection from someone more powerful than the duke. Orion wasn't that person. Even if he managed to achieve his goal, if he perfected the use of firestone for a less expensive, healthier alternative fuel, that would only be enough to secure his financial independence from the duke.

Orion weaved through the crowd, lost in his thoughts, when a figure in an elaborate pirate costume, complete with a tricorn hat and a mock cutlass at his side, bumped



into him. The man's pointed ears, a distinct sign of his half-elf heritage, peeked out from beneath his hat.

"Pardon me, friend," the pirate said, his voice light with the merriment of the evening. His eyes, a striking shade of green, twinkled with unspoken tales of adventure and mischief. One might almost take him for a real pirate.

Orion, recognizing the man despite his costume, let a small smile crack his stoic demeanor. "No harm done, Callon."

The pirate paused, peering more closely at Orion. "Do I know you, sir?" His tone was playful, yet there was a hint of genuine puzzlement.

Orion lowered his voice. "It's me, Callon. Orion."

Callon's eyes widened in recognition, and a broad grin spread across his face. "Orion! By the stars, I didn't recognize you. Playing the mysterious stranger tonight, are we?"

Orion managed a half-hearted chuckle. "Something like that."

Callon clapped him on the shoulder, his smile fading slightly as he noted Orion's tension. "You seem troubled, my friend. The weight of the world on your shoulders, even at a ball such as this. Come, now. Even if it's your less-than-benevolent father throwing the event, you can still enjoy yourself. And at his expense."

Orion glanced around, ensuring they weren't overheard. "Things are somewhat too complicated for that at the moment."

The half-elf nodded sagely, his expression turning more serious. "I understand. I'm no stranger to unpleasant machinations of kin and court. If it's worse than the usual, I

am here to give aid. You know that, do you not?"

There was a comfort in Callon's words, a reminder of the friendships Orion had outside his father's shadow. "Thank you. That means more than you know."

The half-elf's expression lightened again, and he gestured with a theatrical flourish. "Let us not dwell on shadows this evening. The night is young, and there are tales to be told, dances to be had. Perhaps a duel or two with these noble blades." He shook the hilt of his mock cutlass with a laugh.

Orion allowed himself a smile. "If a duel could solve my problem, I would take you up on that."

"That bad, is it?" The half-elf's eyes momentarily darkened. "We cannot speak plainly here, obviously." Callon tipped his head toward a knot of people, several of them ladies, watching their conversation with curious looks. "But after, come to my house. We can talk. It's been too long."

Orion agreed, and they parted ways.

As Callon disappeared back into the throng of the ball, Orion stood for a moment, watching the dancers swirl in a blur of color and laughter. The music, the laughter, the clinking of glasses—it all seemed a world away from the serious matters occupying his thoughts. As he moved through the throng of guests, Orion felt a momentary ease. Even as his thoughts remained on Elara and the promise he had made.

Orion arrived at Callon's house as the first light of dawn was breaking over the horizon. The dwelling was modest, tucked away in a quiet corner of the city, its unassuming exterior belying the influence of Callon's family.

It wasn't the butler but Callon himself who opened the door, his expression alert despite the early hour. "Orion, come in." He stepped aside to let his friend enter.

Inside, the house was cozy and well-kept, a stark contrast to the opulent excess of the duke's home. Orion took a seat in the modest drawing room.

He recounted everything to Callon—his encounter with Elara in the garden, her desperate situation, and the promise he had made. He spoke of the duke's demands and the impossibility of turning flora into gold, his words heavy with the weight of the responsibility he felt. He didn't trust anyone the way he did his oldest friend. And he needed help.

Callon listened intently, his green eyes thoughtful. "And what of your work with the firestone?" he asked after a moment. "How close are you to a breakthrough?"

Orion pushed a hand through his hair, impatiently. "I believe I'm on the verge of something significant. I'm nearly ready for testing."

Callon nodded, considering. "If you're right, this could be the leverage you need. Not merely for your independence, but as a bargaining chip to protect Elara and her father."

Orion's gaze hardened with determination. "The duke's patience won't last for long."

"I'll arrange a demonstration of your work," Callon said decisively. "I have contacts who would be interested in such an innovation. People with enough influence to hold the duke at bay."

Orion didn't feel much relief at that. "Thank you, Callon. Until then, I need to keep Elara safe."

The two men spent the next hour devising a plan. They spoke in hushed tones, their conversation a series of strategies and contingencies.

As Orion stood to leave, the afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows.

“We’ll make this work, Orion,” Callon said, clasping his friend’s shoulder. “For the lady’s sake, and for the future you’re trying to build.”

“I hope so.” Orion nodded, resolve hardening. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Stepping out of Callon’s house, Orion felt the weight of his promise to Elara, his own hard work, and his mother’s well-being, all settling heavily on his shoulders. The stakes were high, and the risks were many, but he would see this through. For Elara, for her father, his mother, and for a chance at a future free from the duke’s shadow.

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### Chapter

### Six

A knock at their chamber door the next morning brought Elara to her feet, away from her study of her father's notes as she desperately hoped for something that would help them out of their situation. She opened the door with her heart in her throat, fearing every moment that the duke would discover the truth about her father's promises.

Mr. Fitzmartin stood there, looking as discombobulated as she felt. His spectacles alone remained tidy. Everything else was something of a mess. His jacket had streaks of dust on the sleeves and shoulders. His cravat looked like it was strangling him. His dark curls stuck out from his head in odd waves. And when she looked down, even his fine shoes were scuffed.

He was quite rumpled.

The man cleared his throat and tucked his upraised hand hastily behind him. Then he bowed. "Good morning, Miss Millstone."

Elara clutched the door handle and didn't budge. "I wouldn't call it that, Mr. Fitzmartin."

He winced. "Might I come in? I would like a word with you. Please."

She stared at him, uncomprehending the question. As the duke's son, seemingly as one of the duke's messengers, he had every right to brush right by her. To do and say

what he wished. “My father isn’t available for conversation, sir. He is at work and shouldn’t be disturbed.”

His eyes softened, and her heart fluttered at the look of compassion within them. A disconcerting response, given the circumstances.

“I wish to speak to you , Miss Millstone. Not your father.”

He wouldn’t push his way in, either. Or make demands. He still waited on her permission to enter. That intrigued her.

“Very well.” She stepped aside, allowing him in. The remaining footman didn’t so much as bat an eye as she closed the door.

She turned and pressed her back to the wood. In a lowered voice, her unexpected visitor said, “I read through your father’s notebook before having it delivered to you. There are brilliant conjectures and formulas within them. Your father has a keen intellect.” Then he looked down at her, his eyes soft behind his spectacles. “But none of it can really be proven.”

“I know.” Elara pressed her hands against the wood. “No amount of magic or alchemy can create gold from nothing.”

“What will you do?” he asked, eyeing her with care.

Slowly, she shook her head, the mysterious stranger still in her mind. “Delay as long as I can, until I think of something.”

He nodded slightly. “I may be able to help with a delay. I have something to show you.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I think I’m supposed to stay here.”

For the first time since meeting him, she saw Orion’s smile. It was slight, but it made his handsome face even more attractive. “I have secured you a workroom, Miss Millstone.” A spark appeared in his eyes. “And putting it to rights to make it usable will take at least a couple of days.”

Elara rang for Bess to come and sit with her father. The maid had been assigned to her after the ball, thank goodness. After Orion asked to borrow a specific notebook from Papa, he led her through the duke’s house.

“I have a plan to help you. My father will want everything done precisely.” He spoke with rapidity as they walked through the corridors, deeper into the household. “I agreed this morning to oversee the process myself.”

“I cannot understand why,” she whispered.

He didn’t seem to hear. “A few of your father’s notes provided an idea, the process by which we can buy time.”

“What use is more time if the feat is impossible?”

“I have something else I’m working on. Something that will give me a better position from which to help you.” He paused at a turn in the corridors and met her gaze. “This part of the house is old. Ancient, in fact. All of Mayfair was built atop the ruins of a druid settlement. Did you know that?” He wore a look of grim determination, making him seem older than she guessed him to be. “When the first duke, my great-grandfather, commissioned his house on the property, he demanded the builders keep as much of the older structures as possible. Shored up. Surrounded by new wood and bricks. But still...” He lifted the edge of the thick rug on which they stood, revealing the naked gray stone underneath. “Much of the stonework remains.”

He started walking again.

Her brow wrinkled. “Why is this important?”

“In your father’s notes, he suggests that working on land steeped in magic will aid the process.” He stopped before a door that curved at the top, following a stone archway.

Elara stared at where wood brushed ancient stone. “So he will let me work here.” She still wasn’t convinced by his idea.

“Yes. Now, I present to you, your workroom.” Orion pushed the door open.

She stepped inside with a quiet gasp. Someone, likely Orion given the dust on his clothes, had thrown open the heavy velvet drapes at the window, flooding the room with light while dust motes danced in the air.

Heavy old tables lined the wall beneath the window. And bookcases made of thick, dark wood lined one wall. A tapestry featuring a stag and a unicorn bowing to one another covered the opposite wall.

Elara stepped into the room, her eyes widening at the sight. The thick stone walls, remnants of the druid settlement, stood in stark contrast to the Georgian architectural elements that had been added later.

On closer inspection, the light from the windows revealed intricate carvings on the exposed stone walls—symbols and patterns that hinted at the room’s mystical past.

She went to the tables to run her hands across the boards. They were crafted from dark, aged wood. They bore the marks and scratches of many years. These tables, coupled with the various shelves and cabinets filled with forgotten artifacts and books, gave the room the air of a long-abandoned laboratory.



The room felt alive, as if the stones held memories of the magic once practiced within the walls.

She turned slowly, taking in every detail—the way the modern additions to the room were carefully designed to complement rather than overshadow its ancient features. Alabaster columns in each corner, a ceiling of white tiles with delicate carvings of birds and fruits. It was clear the duke’s grandfather had harbored a deep respect for the magic of old.

“This room...it’s like stepping back in time,” Elara murmured, her earlier skepticism giving way to a sense of awe.

She turned to see Orion watching her reaction closely. “It’s the perfect place for your work. A room where the old magic still lingers.”

Elara couldn’t deny the strange energy that pulsed through the room. It was as if the stones themselves were waiting, ready to lend their strength to her. The room itself, with its blend of eras and energies, felt like an ally.

She turned to the gentleman with his messy hair, dust-streaked clothing, and generally untidy appearance. “Thank you, Mr. Fitzmartin. That you’re willing to help me at all is more than I could have hoped for.”

His shoulders relaxed, and one corner of his mouth went upward in a bitter smile. “I am weary of the duke’s hold on my life, Miss Millstone. I will help you avoid any ill fate I can, for as long as I can, and hopefully find a way to free you from his power. Now. Why don’t we make a show of tidying the place? When the duke sends someone to check up on us—as I promise you, he will—there will be a measure of progress to appease him.”

Elara’s mind spun. “I must insist no one enters the room itself except for us. No

maids to tidy, lest they disturb something essential. And we will need many, many items. To distill the oils from the flowers. A burner. Glass jars, full of every elixir my father has ever listed in his notes.”

His expression warmed and turned slowly into a most charming grin. “It sounds dreadfully complicated, Miss Millstone.” He handed her the book he had carried. “You had better make more lists.”

She grinned back at him as she hugged the book to her chest. “Thank you,” she said again, softer. “Why...why are you helping me like this? Really? You could tell the duke it’s a waste of time.”

The gentleman regarded her silently, head slightly tilted. “Because it’s the right thing to do, Miss Millstone.”

Her heart skipped a beat, rather unexpectedly. “You may call me Elara. We are in this together, now. May as well be friends.”

He gave her a bow, the same one that had made her feel like a lady the day before. “Then I am Orion.” His smile reappeared, though somewhat crooked. “I will go in search of cleaning supplies. We have work to do.” He left the room.

Elara turned slowly at its center, then drug a chair from one corner across to the tables. She sat down and paged through the notebook, where she found her father’s scribbles about coaxing natural elements to become something else. Something better.

She snorted. “As though a daisy doesn’t already feel contentment being a daisy.” Only humans thought a flower would improve upon turning to a lifeless piece of metal.

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### Chapter

### Seven

Three days passed with Orion arriving every morning to help Elara to clean the dusty workroom. He spent much of his time trying to coax a smile or two from her. She had so much pressing on her heart, and it was difficult to leave her looking hopeless. He left each day shortly after noon, returning to his home to work on his own experiment. Callon met him there, dressed like a High Fey lord rather than the half-elf he was. He spent mornings writing letters, afternoons with Orion, and evenings meeting with “people of note.”

All Orion had to do was prove his claim to said people, that the plentiful firestones found in every corner of the kingdom could produce light, heat, and the energy necessary to power something as complex as a steam engine. With simple alchemical conditioning and clever engineering.

And he was nearly there. He’d put the stones to work in his house. Beneath his mother’s tea kettle, in his hearth hidden by coal, beneath the burners in his laboratory.

He didn’t have to change the stones at all. He only coaxed them into doing something incredible. The potential had been there the whole time, for all the centuries that the stones had made up the walls and ruins of England.

It only took the right key, the right word, to access it.

“Heating a tea kettle won’t be enough,” Callon told him that afternoon. “I have a

dozen interested parties. They need to see something bigger.”

“A steam engine.” They’d discussed that possibility before. “The current design of every steam engine in England utilizes coal power. It doesn’t matter how I run the formulas—that design won’t work for the firestones.” He looked up at a sketch hung on his wall of an engine as currently designed. “And I’m not an engineer.”

“I know someone willing to work with us. My engineer needs your permission to enter your sanctuary.” Callon gestured with both hands to the workroom. A workroom Orion had warded against everyone but himself and his most trusted friend.

“You trust him?”

Callon gave a sharp nod. “I trust her with my life.”

The sex of the individual didn’t matter a whit. The ability did. “Then bring her with you next time you come.” He looked up at the clock near the stairwell. “It’s nearly time for dinner.”

“I know. Your mother invited me to join you both. I said yes, of course. Your cook has an incredible talent with vegetables.” Callon, like full-blooded elves, didn’t have much liking for meat. “Before we go up, though, I thought I would ask about your florist friend. How is she holding up?”

“She doesn’t look as though she’s slept much.” Orion had noted purple half-circles beneath her eyes that morning. They’d finished tidying the room, and she had given him a list of supplies to procure. He had to go looking for everything on her list, as the duke wouldn’t hear of her leaving the house. “But there’s hope in her eyes.”

Callon tapped his fingers on the surface of a table. “If I were her, I wouldn’t be

sleeping. But she'll make herself sick that way, and if she does, it will draw the duke's attention more than either of you would like. At this point, he's a contented cat, watching the birds through the window. Push him too far, and he'll slink out into the garden for a closer look at his prey."

"How did you manage to make cats sound sinister?"

"Cats aren't sinister. Merely Fey creatures."

They left the cellar, and Orion tried to put everything from his mind while he enjoyed the evening meal with his mother and closest friend. Yet Callon's prediction remained with him. Twitching at his mind and thoughts.

What if Elara wasn't sleeping at all? Making herself ill would bring down the duke's notice in the worst possible way.

He needed to check on her. Reassure himself that she wasn't staying awake all night, working at the impossible. He'd been unable to tell her of his plan. If she let any of it slip to the duke, if she even spoke aloud in her sleep where a servant might hear, everything he worked for could be undone. If that happened, they would both face their doom.

Orion couldn't let his father know of his concern, either. Which meant utilizing one of the few secrets he had learned from his grandfather and his own boyish explanations.

The secret of the druid-room. The very reason he'd put Elara there to begin with.

He dressed in black from head to toe and put on his cloak, spelled to make him blend with shadows. Then he took himself out into the night, to the travel stone hidden among the beauties of Hyde Park. The druid stone which his great-grandfather had

paid a small fortune to connect to the same stones in his London residence.

France had been leading their nobility to Madame Guillotine at the time, so Orion's ancestor hadn't been acting out of baseless fear when he'd made a way for his family to escape their London home in the dead of night. One stone, removed from the floor of a hidden room, placed in the park, had become a pathway for the family.

Anyone of the first duke's bloodline could access it. Including an illegitimate child, like Orion.

Elara sat hunched over the table, her eyes heavy with exhaustion. Around her, the room was a chaos of activity frozen in time: notes scattered across surfaces, their edges curling slightly, and several bouquets of drying herbs and flowers hanging from the shelves, their fragrances mingling in the stale air.

A single lamp flickered on the table, casting long shadows that danced across the walls. Elara's hand rested on a note, the duke's handwriting unmistakable, demanding an update on her progress by morning. She stared at it, a growing sense of dread knotting in her stomach. All she had accomplished was cleaning the room and ordering supplies. How could she explain that to the His Grace without invoking his wrath?

Her eyelids drooped, the words on the pages before her blurring into an indecipherable mess. She shook her head, trying to ward off the tendrils of sleep, but it was a losing battle.

She closed her eyes and briefly rested her cheek against the table's surface. A few moments of rest wouldn't hurt.

As she was about to surrender to the beckoning sleep, a soft sound snapped her back to alertness. The tapestry on the far wall, of the stag and the unicorn, fluttered

slightly, as if caught in a breeze.

Elara's eyes widened as the fabric moved again, more deliberately this time, and a figure stepped out from behind it. A man in a cloak emerged from the stone itself. He moved with grace, his presence almost ghostly in the dim light of the room.

For a moment, Elara's heart raced with fear. But as the figure stepped into the light, the hood of the cloak shadowing everything but a mouth and strong chin, Elara recognized him.

It was the man from the masquerade, his lips pressed into a somber line. Relief washed over her in a wave, followed quickly by a surge of questions.

"It's you," she breathed, her voice barely above a whisper. "What are you doing here? How did you...?"

He raised a hand, a gesture for silence, as he glanced around the room, taking in the disarray of her work. "I came to see how you are faring," he said softly. "And to fulfill our bargain."

Elara slumped back in her chair, the tension of the night inexplicably easing in his presence.

The cloaked and masked man stepped closer, his gaze flicking to the note on the table. "I bring with me a way to appease the duke, for at least a short time," he said, his voice firm with resolve.

From his cloak, the masked man withdrew a spool of thread. The flickering light danced across the filament, and it reflected the light back in a gleam of—

"Is that gold?" she asked, stepping forward. "Gold thread?"

The stern lips briefly kicked upward but didn't quite make it to a smile. "On loan, for now. But yes. It's gold thread."

She shook her head slightly. "I don't understand."

He gestured with his other gloved hand to her table. "May I?"

Elara stepped out of his way. "Please."

The masked man swept across the room to the table, where he gathered one of her drying bundles of flowers to lay across its surface. "Flora to metallicum is unlikely to ever occur, through magical means or otherwise. To turn it to aurum is impossible." His voice, low and grim, made her want to shudder.

"Latin doesn't impress me, sir," she said, gripping the edge of the table with one hand as he unwound the spool. "I know all the Latin names for my flowers, and most other things my father thought I ought to be trained to know. Metal and gold. Say the words you mean."

"Habit," he answered without sounding the least bit contrite.

"I know it's impossible," she added. "But we made a deal."

"Even after you were advised against such a thing." He sounded oddly disapproving considering he was the one who'd agreed to it. "I will uphold my end of the bargain." He picked up a pair of thick, sharp shears from the worktable and cut the thread. "Start shredding the stalks of your flowers, Miss Millstone. The fibers as thin as you can make them."

She stared at him for a moment in surprise, but then did as she was bid. She took a barely dried flower and tore the stem along its length. Piece after piece. While he cut



the thread. The gold thread. She realized the lengths of his pieces of thread were comparable to the foot or so of each thin piece of green stalk.

“This will never fool anyone,” she whispered as the green juice from the plant stained her fingernails.

“This is only the first part of the plan.” He finished with his gold thread and tucked it inside his cloak, withdrawing a small snuff box instead. He opened it and held it out to her, and the inside glittered with gold powder.

“Gold mixed with mica,” he told her. “Dip your fingers in, please. Make sure you get some of the dust beneath your nails.”

She darted a glance up at him, finding his eyes watching her intently through the holes in his mask.

She obeyed, coating her fingertips in the tiny metal flakes.

“Sprinkle a bit across the table. Then wind some of the gold threads through with the stalks. Mix it all as much as you can. And get those plant fibers thinner.”

“It isn’t *Linum usitatissimum*, sir.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “What?”

Elara released a puff of a laugh, shocking herself that she even could laugh under the circumstances. “Flax. *Linum usitatissimum* is flax, which is where linen comes from. Or didn’t you know that?”

“Ah. Using Latin against me now, are you?” This time, he certainly smiled. “And that’s precisely what you will tell the duke. Flax begets linen, but only after a lengthy

process. Your gold quality is poor, and tiny, because you haven't the right items to work with."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "I need larger quantities of the right kind of plant, and they must go through the same process as flax to become linen."

This time, the smile was more of a grin. "Precisely. This process, from flax to linen, is a beautiful alchemy. It turns a simple plant into a fabric that has graced kings and commoners alike. Magic through ingenuity."

"What do I ask for?" She picked up one of the plant fibers and split it down the middle again. "Something difficult to get, but not so difficult that His Grace knows we're stalling for time. I assume that's what we're doing, since you say the actual feat I'm meant to perform is impossible?"

He gave a solemn nod. "Yes. We're stalling."

Elara's hands worked diligently, separating the plant fibers, her mind racing with the implications of their plan. "We need something that would believably challenge the process," she said, her voice steady despite the whirling of her thoughts. "Perhaps a rare variant of flax, one that's rumored to have golden properties. Something only found in distant lands."

He picked up the note, but she barely noticed. Her thoughts were on far-away fields of crops, her fingers busy picking apart the flowers.

"Suggest that only a specific type of flax, say, from the hills of Tuscany, known for its unique golden hue, can yield the results the duke desires. It's specific enough to be plausible, but not entirely unobtainable."

Elara felt a surge of admiration for his quick thinking. "And in the meantime, I

continue with these experiments, giving the appearance of progress.”

He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “Exactly. Every bit of effort you show adds to the credibility of your work. The duke needs to believe you are on the cusp of a breakthrough.” He put the note back on the table.

She glanced up at him, her eyes reflecting a mix of gratitude and newfound determination. “You’re risking a great deal by helping me. Why?”

For a moment, there was silence as he seemed to ponder her question. “I have my reasons. Some battles are worth fighting, even against formidable foes like the Duke of Sutton.”

Elara returned her focus to the task at hand, her fingers lightly dusted with the golden mica. The room was quiet again, save for the soft sounds of their work. The mixture of gold thread and damp plant fibers shone under the lamp light.

“As for the duke’s note,” he continued, “tell him you’ve made a promising start. Mention the need for the special flax. It will buy time.”

Elara nodded, feeling a flicker of hope. “And then?”

“Then,” he said, straightening up and preparing to leave, “we plan our next move. Remember, Miss Millstone, you’re not alone in this. Farewell for now.”

“Good evening,” she answered, looking over her shoulder in time to see him slip behind the tapestry. Vanishing.

She stared at the spot where he had disappeared, then she walked to the wall and lifted the thick cloth, finding solid stone behind it.

The man had to be magic to come and go through stone. Elf, man, magician. It hardly mattered. So long as he kept his promise.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:05 am*

### Chapter

### Eight

Elara had fallen asleep at the desk in the suite she shared with her father. When a hand touched her shoulder, shaking her gently to rouse her, she sat up with a fright—and with flower petals sticking to her cheek. She brushed them off as she looked up at the maid who'd become a friend.

“What time is it?”

“A quarter to nine, miss.” Bess's ears twitched at either side of her white cap. “The duke is going to your workroom in half an hour.” She winced as she took in Elara's visage. “I think we have time for your hair, but little else.”

Elara stood and walked away from the desk. “No. There isn't time for any of it.” She hurried to the basin of water, bent over and splashed her face. “Even with magic?—”

“There is time,” Bess insisted, not moving from her place, her brow furrowed. “Hair is simple. Please, Miss Millstone. Sit. A man like the duke will prefer a show of sophistication to one of haphazardness.”

Elara chewed her lip but complied. She glanced to the closed door of the bedchamber. “My father?—?”

“A valet is seeing to his needs. He must be there,” the maid said, whisking out the pins that had half-fallen out of Elara's limp coiffure. She shook out the waves of

Elara's hair, pursed her lips, then spoke several words Elara didn't understand. Mewling, lyrical words Elara doubted she could even try to repeat. The magic made her hair shine, soft and gold, and then Bess gave the tresses a gentle shake. The waves of hair piled themselves upward, in twists and curls, and froze in place. Elara's mouth dropped open in her shock.

"You didn't do that for the ball," she whispered. "Just the color-changing spell."

Bess popped pins into the hair as it remained where she'd magicked it. "Of course not, miss. Magic takes it out of the caster, doesn't it? But this is important."

Before Elara could ask any questions or even think on that, the door to the bedroom opened and her father came out. His eyes glowed with joy, his steps long and his energy apparent.

Today was a good day for him.

"You had success, my dear?" he asked, grinning at her through the mirror. "You must've, for the duke to inspect things this morning. Oh, I wish I'd been with you last night. To see your triumph!"

Her heart twisted. She hadn't considered that the duke wasn't the only one she'd need to deceive. "You need your rest, Papa. You already did the hardest part of the work when you devised your formulas."

"You're ready, miss." Bess stepped away with a tight-lipped frown. "And you'd best not keep the duke waiting."

"One more thing, for your grand moment," her father said, lifting her hand from where it rested atop the dressing table. "This was your mother's. I think you ought to have it, so she can be with you too during this moment." He removed a ring from his

pocket, one that Elara instantly recognized.

It had adorned her mother's right index finger, and then her father had worn it on his smallest finger for a time. It was a simple ring. Likely of no real monetary value. A thin band of silver, made up of two twisting vines, with the smallest of blue stones peeping out at regular intervals. It had always made Elara think of buds on a stem, waiting to grow.

She let her father slip the ring on her index finger, where it fit perfectly and felt warm, somehow. Her eyes stung, but she didn't let the tears form. She embraced her father, then took his hand. "We need to hurry so we arrive before the duke."

Her father didn't protest as she practically dragged him out of the room and down the corridors. The footmen stationed outside their suites followed, a grim reminder of how much danger they were in if the ruse failed.

They arrived before the duke, and Elara used the precious minutes to explain to her father the process she and the masked stranger had come up with the evening before. "It's like flax, Papa," she said. "See. The gold comes from the stems, from nature itself, but only after it is coaxed and woven there with my green-fingered magic." She held up her hands.

Her father's eyes narrowed as he took in the mess that she had created with her strange savior. Stems. Powder. Gold threads. Fiber—half of it dry, some of it wilted. Her heart pounded, the blood thrummed loudly in her ears, and Elara realized her mistake.

If her father doubted her in front of the duke, it would be the end. Why hadn't she considered this before? She'd been so busy trying to fix the problem that she hadn't considered his ability to cast them into an even worse circumstance.

To her relief, and her shame, her father nodded. “It makes beautiful sense,” he murmured, bending to look at the work. “It changes a few of my suppositions, but it is a harmonious result.”

It hurt to lie to him. But it would hurt more to lose him to an asylum. Or for them both to face transportation. Whatever it was the duke wished to do to punish them for duplicity and failure.

The door opened without warning.

Why would a duke knock in his own domain?

He strode in, and Orion came behind him.

Some of the tension left her shoulders when Orion met her gaze, the frames of his spectacles glinting in the morning light. He gave her a brief, subtle smile. His hair stuck out at odd angles, and she wondered if he’d barely received the summons in time to join them. His cravat was askew. His appearance rumpled. He was a contrast to his father, for all that they had similar facial features and a broad-shouldered structure. The duke’s appearance was perfect. Meticulously correct .

He came forward with a cold smile.

“Good morning, Mr. Millstone. Miss Millstone. You have something to show me.”

Her father started talking, and Elara kept her lips pressed together. She met Orion’s startled glance and shook her head slightly. But her father, referencing his own studies and what knowledge he had of plant magic, explained everything Elara had convinced him of with perfect confidence. She tucked her hands behind her back and clenched them into fists to control their shaking.



Her father explained the situation better than she could have, given that she knew it was all a ruse. A clever deceit. And their lives depended on it.

The duke came forward and inspected everything, a slow smile curling his lips, as he nodded. He lifted a magnifying glass from the table to inspect the threads carefully, and Elara's blood ran cold.

Orion moved closer, quite subtly, and his warm hand cover one of her closed fists while her elbow brushed against his side. The effect this had on her couldn't be measured, but she felt a wave of warmth ripple through her.

Her father came to the end of his explanation. "These are only the first results, of course, and hard-won given the inferiority of the plants. You can see the drying fibers nearly all changed to gold. The damp fibers are almost useless. Superior flora will lead to a better output, we are certain. My daughter will have to explain that part, as it is her specialty."

The duke straightened from his study and turned to face her a mere moment after Orion released her hand and moved back again.

"This is acceptable, Miss Millstone." A calculating brightness appeared in his eyes, like sunlight reflecting off ice. He'd believed the lie so fully that pretense fell away, and his smile was a predator's flash of hungry teeth. "This is the first time I have seen results this promising in the four decades I have worked toward this end. And it's all because of plant magic. What is that quaint term people use?" He looked at Orion rather than Elara.

"Green fingers," Orion answered, voice hoarse.

The duke believed her. Orion had no idea how she'd managed this step. She'd have to explain everything to him the moment they were alone.

“Green fingers.” The duke held his hand out to her, and she put her palm in his, relieved he wore gloves. He wouldn’t feel how cold and slick with dread her hand had become. He held her hands up, and a laugh burst from him. “An apt name. Look at the stains—and the gold—on these dainty little hands.” Her turned her palm over, inspecting it closely.

Her mysterious friend had been right to dip her fingers in the golden-hued powder.

The duke’s hunger hadn’t left his expression as he asked, “What do you need to continue? What do you need to create more and better gold?”

She tilted her chin up. Ready for this answer. “The finest flax straw you can find. Already dried and prepared. Bushels and bushels of it. I believe it should come from fields that are regularly bathed in sunlight, as we are aware that light can impact the growth and health of plants. I do not think anything in England will do, because of our growing conditions.”

“Imported flax straw,” the duke murmured, releasing her hand at last. “From dry climates.” He slowly nodded. “I will see to it you are brought several strains to test. From Spain, Italy, Egypt—everywhere.” He looked to Orion. “You assisted Miss Millstone through her experiments?”

Orion nodded. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“You will continue to do so. Give the orders to my secretary.”

She twisted her mother’s ring around her finger and swallowed. Her father seemed pleased, not at all aware of the danger they were in. They were two little mice with nowhere to hide, making promises to a hungry tiger with nothing but them in his sights.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:05 am*

### Chapter

### Nine

Leaning against the table where gold and weeping green stems had been but an hour before, Orion watched Elara's rapid pacing on the other side of the room. The nearly unintelligible rush of words spilling out of Elara would have been humorous if her life wasn't in danger. As it was, she told him everything about her deal with the mysterious stranger, who she thought might be Fey of some sort, and the same stranger's assistance with her work.

She had no idea Orion and the masked man were the same person. His secret, and thus the safety of his mother, remained intact. Guilt stirred in his gut at the deception, but they were all in danger. And so much depended on him. If he failed Elara, he'd never forgive himself. The least he could do was keep his mother safe.

If they managed to succeed in their plans, if he created a means for his freedom, for prominence independent of the duke, he would have the influence he needed to save Elara and her father from their fate. Then, he'd tell her everything. Once they were safe.

When she stopped her pacing at last and stared up at him, wringing her hands together, Orion nodded his understanding. "It is a good beginning, and whatever else your benefactor is, it seems he wants to help you. I will keep your secret and continue to do whatever you need me to do."

"I'm worried about my father." She stepped nearer Orion. "Everything worked well

today, but that was luck. What if next time he isn't entirely lucid? What if he says something that reveals everything?"

Orion gathered her hands in his, stilling the way she kept twisting a ring around her finger. "He's been content to work on the theoretics thus far, hasn't he?"

She gave a hesitant nod. "He's working out more formulas, right now, and researching everything he can about flax."

"Your father has kept to your rooms so far, and with encouragement I believe he will continue there. And the duke hasn't summoned him, because he believes your father is working on all of this." Orion motioned to the disarray around them.

"That luck will not hold forever." She lowered herself to one of the stools they'd drawn up near the table. Her forlorn expression bruised his heart. From their conversations, from observing her, he'd learned that she'd been responsible for her family's upkeep for years. She'd been the one to sell their belongings off, one by one, until there'd been nothing left to sell. She'd been the one to find her sisters places to go when she couldn't afford to feed and clothe them. She'd sacrificed her time, her abilities, to earn what little coin they had. Elara had carried a burden far larger than anyone should, all on her own, knowing the future stretched before her full of nothing but grim endurance and loneliness.

He couldn't let her think she was alone now.

Orion knelt in front of her. He scooped up her hands from her lap and held them in his, drawing her gaze to him. Her hands were cold, her fingers slim, with calluses at the tips. Small scars scattered across the backs of her hands—likely from handling plants with briars and nettles. He'd watched her expertly work with flowers nearly every day he'd known her. Plucking at them, binding them, stripping them of leaves, arranging them, imbuing them with her subtle magic. They were beautiful hands,

adept at their work.

“Orion? Are you all right?” she asked, and he realized he’d been staring at her hands too long.

He let out a laugh that was little more than a breath of air. “You ask me that when you’re the one facing down a duke?” He looked up at her, catching the concern in her eyes. “I’m well enough, Elara. It’s you I’m worried about.”

She curled her fingers around his, not breaking eye contact. “I’m less worried when you’re here,” she admitted, her voice soft. “I don’t know what I would do without your kindness. Thank you.”

He stood and drew her up from her stool. “Let me take you someplace else for a while. I will send word to the duke that we need to consult an expert. He’ll have us followed, of course, but at least you’ll be free of this cage for a few hours. Your father can come, too.”

She tipped her head to the side, and he saw the lilac-hued half-circles beneath her eyes. “Where are we going?”

He smiled at her and squeezed her hands, an action which suddenly reminded him he was still holding them. He released her fingers, perhaps too hastily, and rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s a surprise. A pleasant one, I promise. This afternoon. After you’ve rested. Three o’clock.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head to the side as she considered his invitation. “All right. Three o’clock. We’ll be ready.”

“And rested?”

Her lips curved up in a slight smile. “And rested,” she repeated. “Thank you, Orion.”

He escorted her from the workroom back to her suite, where the maid waited, and her father sat on the sofa reading a book. After he bid them his good wishes, he left. He had much to do, on little sleep, on many fronts.

Elara and her father waited on the steps of the duke’s residence, a stern-faced servant at her father’s side. They ought to have waited inside, but she could hardly keep still from her eagerness to leave her prison, even if only for a short time. When a modest black carriage came down the road and stopped before the duke’s house, her whole being tensed.

The moment the carriage door opened and Orion stepped out, she felt a new tremor of emotion. Relief . When he looked up at her, sweeping off his hat to make a bow, her cheeks flushed.

Orion spoke sternly to the servant, whose purpose had thus far been only to stand still as a statue and glare at everything. “Please inform His Grace that I will take responsibility for his guests this afternoon. You are dismissed.”

The servant bowed and stepped back.

She hadn’t heard Orion speak with such command. She had to look again at the gentleman wearing wire-rimmed spectacles, the hair still somewhat wild with curls even when covered by his hat. He wasn’t as rumpled as he’d been that morning, though. His cravat looked as though it had been arranged with care, his clothing was suitable for a gentleman, and he wore gloves.

She looked down at her own attire self-consciously. Her things had been brought to the duke’s home, but her clothing, while clean, was quite plain. Befitting the status of a woman who did nothing but sit in the back of a flower shop or visit vendors on

behalf of the shop owner.

For the first time in ages, she missed the clothing she had worn when her father had been a prosperous apothecary. The day dresses of light blue and green, the bonnets adorned with ribbons, and shoes meant to be pretty rather than serviceable.

Yet when Orion handed her into his carriage and she glanced down to thank him, the way he looked at her didn't feel like a man who saw a poor flower girl. His eyes blazed with a reassuring confidence that renewed her own, and the slight upward tilt of his lips gave her leave to smile back.

He tapped the carriage ceiling after climbing inside himself, taking the rear-facing seat across from her and her father. He removed his hat and offered them a crooked smile. "Escape, at last."

"At least for a while," she amended, glancing quickly at her father.

Her father patted her hand where it rested on the seat between them. "It is always good to take time away from work. It refreshes the mind."

"Precisely." Orion's smile didn't falter, though his gaze flicked to Elara. "Which is why I arranged for this outing. I think you will enjoy it, Mr. Millstone. It ought to be as stimulating to the mind as it is refreshing. We are on our way to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich."

Elara's father immediately perked up. "Truly? What a wonderful idea. Though, given that it is still daylight, I doubt we will be able to use the telescope."

"We will certainly stay long enough to accomplish that purpose," Orion promised as he folded his arms, leaning back in his seat. "Prior to the evening's enjoyment, however, I thought you would like to discuss the movement of the stars and how it

may affect your work, so you have appointment with Sir George Airy.”

“The Royal Astronomer?” Papa reached into his coat and withdrew a notebook he’d appropriated from her supplies the day before, its first several pages already full of his notes on the properties of the plants she’d asked the duke to provide. “I must reflect on this opportunity at once and think of my questions now so there will not be a moment lost once we are introduced. You do not mind, Elara?”

“Not at all, Papa. If you do not mind that Mr. Fitzmartin and I have a conversation of our own?”

“It will take half an hour or so to arrive, depending on the congestion of the streets.” Orion appeared completely relaxed, at ease in a way she hadn’t yet seen him in his father’s house. His expression seemed more cheerful, too. Which she supposed made perfect sense, given that she’d only seen him when they’d needed to focus on their work toward deceiving a powerful and dangerous man.

A gentle warmth eased into her chest, like the first rays of spring sun in a meadow, melting away the frost from the ground. “What would we do without you?” she asked aloud, voice soft, mindful of her father’s already frenzied writing in his book. He’d not pay them any heed once lost in his musings, she knew. But she’d rather not take a chance of distressing him.

Orion’s gaze softened as he looked at Elara, his voice low. “I find myself asking what I would do without this opportunity to help you. There’s a certain...clarity, that comes from aiding someone else.”

Elara’s stomach dipped at his words, and a blush crept into her cheeks. She couldn’t think why and glanced at her father to ensure he wasn’t paying them any attention. “You’ve been a true ally in all this chaos. I can’t help but wonder why you’ve gone to such lengths for us.”



He paused, seeming to consider his words. “Sometimes, Elara, we encounter situations—or people—that compel us to act. In your determination, I see something remarkable. It’s hard to turn away from that.”

Their eyes met, and for a moment, the world outside the two of them faded away. The sense of connection that had formed in their mornings of working together shifted.

Elara sensed something deeper taking root.

Orion continued, his tone thoughtful. “Life in my father’s shadow has been a series of strategic moves and guarded emotions. But meeting you, Elara, despite the circumstances—it’s made me wish to be bolder. It’s refreshing and, frankly, a bit unsettling.” His bright-eyed gaze flitted from hers to her father’s, his eyes widening slightly, as though he’d forgotten they weren’t alone.

She glanced at her father and made a quick decision. She held her hand out to Orion, and he took it immediately. She used his support to move from her side of the carriage to his, seating herself next to him. Her father didn’t so much as shift or pause in his writing.

She grinned up at Orion. “He hasn’t heard a word we’ve said. He never does when he’s that focused.” Nevertheless, she kept her voice low as she leaned close enough to Orion that their shoulders touched. “Orion, I don’t know how to explain what your help has meant. I’ve felt so alone, even before all of this. Having you with me...it’s given me hope.”

Orion’s hand hovered over hers where she’d lowered it to her lap, as if unsure whether he dared touch her. “Elara, whatever happens, I’m here for you. Not just for the plan, but for you .” His cheeks pinked, and he looked away.

Elara turned her hand over to lace her fingers through his. “Thank you. That means

everything to me.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, each lost in their thoughts. He didn’t release her hand but lowered it to the seat between them. Orion finally broke the quiet, a new lightness in his voice. “Now, tell me, have you ever been to Greenwich before?”

Elara tried to put aside her worries to enjoy the time with Orion. “No, I haven’t. It sounds fascinating.”

The conversation shifted to lighter topics, but the emotional undercurrent remained, a shared understanding that they were on this journey together. As allies, but perhaps as something else. As friends? Although, as his thumb lightly brushed against her palm, sparking an electric current that ran from that point of contact all the way to her heart, Elara wondered if there was more to it than that. And the quickened beat of her pulse made the possibility difficult to ignore.

### Chapter

### Ten

As Sir George Airy, the esteemed Royal Astronomer, greeted Mr. Millstone with a warm handshake, Orion watched Elara's father light up with an enthusiasm he hadn't shown since they'd met. The two men immediately delved into a conversation about the celestial movements and their mystical correlation to apothecary arts. It was a sight that brought a faint smile to Orion's lips. Seeing Mr. Millstone engaged and animated made for a stark contrast to his usual distracted demeanor.

Turning to Elara, Orion noticed a look of relief and contentment on her face as she watched her father. "Shall we take a stroll in the gardens while they're conversing?" he suggested. "The flowers here are remarkable."

Elara nodded, her eyes meeting his with a glimmer of gratitude. "I'd like that."

He offered her his arm, and when her fingers settled at the crook of his elbow, he caught his breath at the unexpected jolt of pleasure it gave him. Something was happening here, between the two of them. Orion had felt the shift most clearly that morning, when they'd stood before the duke together and bluffed their way through the initial alchemical results. They were unified in purpose, yes. But there was something more than that at play.

As they walked towards the lush gardens of the Observatory, a sense of peace settled over him. The gardens were a tranquil oasis, a world away from the chaos and scheming of his father. Here, amidst the vibrant colors and fragrant blooms, he could

momentarily forget the weight of his responsibilities and the complex web of deception in which he lived.

They meandered along the neatly trimmed paths, their steps in sync. Orion was acutely aware of Elara beside him, her presence a new and comforting one in the unpredictable storm of his life.

Elara took in the beauty of their surroundings. “It’s incredible here. So different from London’s streets. It feels like we’re in a different world.”

Their conversation flowed effortlessly as they discussed various plants and flowers, Elara sharing tidbits of knowledge and personal anecdotes that he found fascinating.

Orion found himself speaking of his mother. “She isn’t in the best of health. She is often tired, without reason that the doctors can find. She grows cold easily, so she keeps near our hearth at home. I take her to the theater as often as she wishes to go, though. She loves it there. I think, had she not had me to worry about, she would have been a great actress. Though she takes great pains to assure me that she would rather have me than her place in the spotlight.”

“She must love you very much.” Elara gave his arm a gentle squeeze. It was good of her, not to ask the probing questions that others did when they learned of his parentage.

Yet, despite her restraint, Orion found himself wanting to tell her more. To explain to her how he had come to be in his own predicament with the duke.

As they reached a secluded bench overlooking a pond, Orion gestured towards it. “Shall we sit for a moment?”

She agreed, and the two of them settled comfortably on the bench. For the first time

since their arrival, her hand slipped off his arm as she adjusted the folds of her gown. Then she folded her hands in her lap and gifted him a peaceful expression that he hadn't seen her wear before. That he'd brought her to a place where she could wear such a look gratified him immensely.

"I think my mother would like you," he said at last, tilting his hand to one side. "After everything is over, once we've extracted ourselves from the duke's hold, it would please me to introduce the two of you. If you wouldn't mind that."

She blinked at him. "Why ever would I mind? I would be honored to meet her. Truly."

He chuckled, the sound dry even to his own ears, and looked down at the ground before them. "You know I am illegitimate. Legally claimed, but unable to inherit the duke's title. My mother was only his mistress, a young actress pressured to accept his attentions. All while he was married to another. Not everyone is eager to form a connection with her. Or me."

Elara stared at him, brow furrowed. "My father was an apothecary for most of my life. He met with all sorts of people, many of them looking for help in desperate circumstances as often as they wanted for potions of health. He raised us, his daughters, to never judge a person by their circumstances. We never knew what brought them to our shop. Instead, we must come to know a person by their character and then trust our instincts to guide us. Knowing you, seeing the sort of man you are, gives me reason to believe your mother is a wonderful person. That you speak so highly of her while you are obviously disgusted by the duke is a most excellent recommendation, too."

She'd given him a gift, even if she didn't know it, with her declaration of trust. He wished he knew how to thank her for it, too. Orion grappled with the desire to reach out, to hold her hand, to offer some physical reassurance of the bond that was

undeniably forming between them.

Every day he'd spent hours in her company, and each time he'd left her side to see to his own work, he'd struggled to walk out the door. Even still, at work in his own cellar, his thoughts often strayed to Elara. Wondering what she did to occupy her evening hours. Hoping she remained safe. Wishing her rescue was already underway.

He'd not felt this way about anyone before.

"Elara, I want you to know that whatever happens, I'm committed to seeing this through with you. Not just because of the plan, but because I..." He paused, searching for the right words. "Because I care about you."

Elara's eyes locked with his, and in them, Orion saw a brief, bright look of hope. She looked down at her hands, twisting the ring she wore around her finger. "Thank you."

For a moment, they sat in silence, the tranquility of the gardens enveloping them. The sun had dropped lower on the horizon. Soon, night would fall. It was time to take her back to the observatory. He rose from the bench and offered her his hand. "We had better find your father and Sir George."

She slipped her hand into his, and Orion felt the tendrils of affection taken root in his heart wrapping tighter about him still. Elara likely didn't even realize that each gesture, each word from her, strengthened the feelings he had for her.

He was quite certain he was falling in love.

They were allies in a quest neither had chosen, bound by circumstances that tested them at every turn. Yet, as the evening stars twinkled into view, Orion hoped their growing connection would bloom into something incredible.

### Chapter

### Eleven

After an exhausting day filled with equations and the making of precarious plans, Orion paced in the sanctuary of his home, striding across the length of his cellar with a restlessness that matched the turmoil in his mind. The heavy knock on the door at the top of the stairs, more assertive than the usual polite taps of servants come with messages, could only belong to one person.

“Enter,” Orion called, halting in his steps.

Callon burst into the room, his usual exuberance hardly tempered by the seriousness of the situation. A twinkle in his eye suggested he relished the challenge. Behind him, a figure appeared who starkly contrasted Callon’s elegant half-elfish form. She was stout and solid, her presence undeniably commanding, with deep-set eyes that scanned the room with a critical, discerning gaze.

Greta Gwynsdaughter, a dwarf engineer whose reputation for innovation and stubborn determination had made her formidable in the world of mechanics.

She marched past Orion, acknowledging his polite bow with a curt nod of her head, and went directly to his workbench. She immediately set to examining Orion’s blueprints spread across the table, her brow furrowed in concentration.

Callon drew Orion aside, a sympathetic frown on his face. “You look horrid, my friend. Has the situation worsened?”

Orion, caught off guard by the directness, hesitated before replying. “The situation with the duke...is complicated,” he admitted, his gaze drifting back to the engineer, who was now muttering to herself as she traced the lines of his designs with a thick finger.

Callon, ever perceptive, followed his friend’s gaze and then back to Orion, his expression softening. “It’s not just about the firestone, is it?” he prodded gently. “This has something to do with the duke’s captives. The woman and her father.”

Taking a deep breath, Orion confessed the depth of his involvement. “It’s become more personal than I anticipated. Elara...she’s remarkable, Callon. Her strength, her determination in the face of such danger—I’ve never met anyone like her.”

The half-elf’s eyes lit up with understanding, and he clapped Orion on the shoulder with a grin. “Ah, so it’s like that, is it? I wondered when you’d finally meet someone who could see past the shadow of your father. She must be quite the lady to have caught your attention amidst all this chaos.”

There wasn’t any point in denying it. Not to Callon. Orion couldn’t help but smile, despite the gravity of their situation. “She is remarkable. I’m determined to help her. But I can’t do it alone.”

Callon’s grin widened, his enthusiasm infectious. “Then it’s a good thing you’re not alone. You have me, and now Greta.” He nodded toward the dwarf, who was making notes of her own with an intensity that made it seem she’d wear a hole in the paper.

Her gaze snapped upward abruptly. “This is impressive,” she said, her voice low and somber. “And feasible. But disruptive. The entire mining industry will change.”

“I know. Hopefully for the better.” Orion crossed the room to stand beside her. “Firestone is less hazardous to mine than coal. It needn’t be endlessly fed into a steam



engine to provide power. And it doesn't produce the thick, black smog and soot that coal does."

"I didn't say it was a bad idea." She sniffed. "Just a disruptive one. Here's what I'm thinking." As Greta outlined her ideas for modifying the steam engine to work with the altered firestone—a process that involved intricate adjustments and a deep understanding of both magic and mechanics—Orion's confidence grew.

Orion had more than a chance of escaping his father's control. And saving Elara.

Timing was everything. As was secrecy. If the duke found out what Orion was trying to accomplish, he could destroy the whole scheme before Orion had the political backing and protection he needed.

The conversation shifted to the technicalities of the project, but in the back of Orion's mind, images of Elara—her smile, her courage, her unwavering hope—remained, driving him forward. He was fighting for her, yes, but also for the promise of a world where their story could have a chance to flourish beyond the confines of the duke's cruelty.

In the stillness of the late night, the makeshift laboratory was enveloped in silence, a stark contrast to the bustling streets of London where Elara had spent the last three years navigating to and from her place of work.

After her outing with Orion the day before, she'd felt hopeful. Lighter, even. But this morning, a note had arrived from the duke. Telling her the first shipment of flax would arrive the next day. He'd also sent a list of questions, quite technical in nature, demanding answers that he might give to others who were interested in his pursuit.

Panic had closed in on her once again. She'd left her father in Bess's care, taking his notes with her. Though her father may have answered the questions, she had no wish

to tax his mind. He was still recording all his thoughts after the visit with the astronomer. There was no reason to take him from that.

Elara, hunched over her worktable, was surrounded by an ever-growing maze of notes and diagrams. She had to look busy. Had to make it seem like she anxiously strove to fulfill the duke's wishes. Sketches of flax, copies of her father's notes, and ramblings about alchemy littered the table. Her hands moved tirelessly, but her eyes burned with fatigue. Exhaustion settled deep in her bones.

The heavy tapestry shifted, the cloth brushing against the stone. Elara turned, gripping the table with one hand to keep the room from spinning. The same mysterious visitor, still cloaked and masked, stepped into the room. His sudden appearance at such a late hour surprised her, but there was a familiar comfort in seeing him again.

Quite familiar, actually. She narrowed her bleary eyes at him.

"I didn't expect to find you here at this hour," he said, his voice carrying a hint of concern. "You should be resting."

Elara sighed, setting down her pen. First Orion, now this masked man, telling her to rest. "I can't sleep. Not when there's so much at stake."

He stepped closer, the concern in his voice now mirrored in his posture. "You must take care of your health. This endeavor won't be won by exhausting yourself."

Elara looked up at him, surprised by the sincerity of his tone. "I received word today that the duke's flax straw will arrive tomorrow."

He paused, his head tilting slightly, as if weighing his next words carefully. "That is unfortunate timing."

Fretting, Elara wrung her hands together. “I know magic comes at a price, and I imagine we will need much more of it before the end. I...I’d like to offer another deal.” She hesitated before continuing, “If you help me fool the duke again, I will give you my mother’s ring. It’s all I have left of value. All I have left of her.”

The visitor remained silent for a moment, the tension in the room making her sway slightly on her feet.

Finally, he spoke, his voice softer, “You’ve already given up so much. Are you sure?”

Elara nodded, her voice cracking from the dryness of her throat. “Yes. Whatever it takes to keep my father and my family safe.”

He stepped forward, his hand reaching out as if to touch her shoulder, then he stilled and pulled back. “Very well. I accept your offer.”

Elara slipped the ring from her finger and held it out to him, her hand trembling as much from emotion as weakness. The mysterious stranger, cloaked in shadows, had become an unlikely ally in her fight against the duke’s demands. For now, that had to be enough reason to trust him.

He took the ring gently, his gloved fingers brushing against hers, causing a fleeting warmth to spread through her. An odd reaction, to be sure.

He tucked the ring away.

Elara nodded, her heart heavy. She had owned that ring for mere hours. But sacrifices had to be made for magic. “Thank you.”

Though she couldn’t see much of his face, thanks to the mask and hood he wore, the

stranger observed her closely, concern etching deeper into his voice as he spoke. “You cannot continue like this. You need rest.”

Elara’s gaze drifted back to her cluttered workspace, her mind racing with all that remained undone. “The duke’s expectations?—”

“Leave the duke’s expectations to me,” he interjected. “I can draft a report for the duke for you to copy. Something believable.”

Surprise flickered in Elara’s eyes, a glimmer of hope amidst the exhaustion. “You would do that?”

“You have bought my services, Elara Millstone,” he reminded her. “It’s imperative you regain your strength. You’ll need all your wits about you.”

His firm tone cut through the fog of her weariness. She could scarcely help her father if she collapsed from exhaustion.

“All right,” she conceded, a weary smile touching her lips. “I’ll try to rest.”

“Good.” He glanced around the room, his gaze taking in the chaos of her efforts. “I’ll begin here. You should find a comfortable place to sleep. Even a few hours can make a difference.”

As Elara moved towards the only comfortable seat left in the room—a time-faded wingback chair—her steps unsteady, she felt a profound gratitude for the stranger’s presence.

Orion was the only other soul who had dared to help. He’d been with her in the daylight, what few hours he could spare, always careful not to promise much. Always mindful of his own precarious situation with the horrible man who had sired him.

Truly, she hated that Orion risked the duke's ire. His mother's health and well-being were as much in peril as her own.

Sinking into the chair, curling up in its seat like a cat, she put her head against the armrest. Then she watched her masked savior as he moved about her work area. Despite the mask and cloak, there was a familiarity to him, a sense of shared purpose that eased the tightness in her chest.

"Thank you," she whispered once more, her eyelids growing heavy.

"Say nothing of it," he replied, his voice a reassuring murmur in the dim room. "Rest now. You have a long day ahead."

Perhaps there was more to the familiarity than the mere sight of him. How many times had this cloaked stranger entered her life? The masquerade. That first night when he had come to the laboratory. And now. Yet he seemed almost to belong, so assured were his movements. Her tired mind tried to take hold of that idea, to grasp it and pull it in like a fish on a line, to examine it. Make sense of it.

But she was far too tired. Sleep quickly claimed her.

### Chapter

### Twelve

“Orion, you’re looking at this the wrong way,” Callon said with a shake of his head. Orion had brought the problem Elara faced to his friend, explaining as he paced frantically back and forth in Callon’s study. “We don’t need a fortune in gold—or other metals—to convince the duke. We need cleverness and a touch of magic.”

Orion stopped pacing and faced him. “Magic?” he echoed.

“Yes, illusion magic,” Callon clarified with a nod. “We enchant the flax straw to appear as gold. Not just any illusion, but one strong enough to withstand casual observation and basic tests. We’ll need real gold thread, a strand, woven into the flax to anchor the illusion. The presence of actual gold will make the magic more convincing, more tangible.”

“That is powerful magic.” Orion rubbed the back of his neck, irritation making his scalp prickle. “And I’m an alchemist. Not a wizard. Elara’s ability with plants certainly won’t stretch that far. I can only think of a handful of people capable of that kind of trick, and I’m not intimate enough with any of them to request such help. Not when the duke is involved.”

“Then it’s a very good thing I know someone.” Callon’s smile looked almost sharp. “And she owes me a favor.”

How Callon knew so many people, Orion couldn’t begin to guess. As a half-elf, he

had some access to the more fantastical forces in Society, but he lived on the outskirts of his father's kind. Never quite accepted, thanks to his human mother's blood.

"This is an enormous risk," Orion said. "Anyone helping us could make an enemy of the duke."

"Leave me to worry over that detail. You focus on your work and keeping Miss Millstone safe. You know, she's been a handy distraction for your father while you prepare to ruin his fortune right beneath his nose."

Orion shook his head, nettled. "Her life is important. As is her father's."

Callon's grin turned even cockier. "I do not disagree. Merely noting that her presence has been convenient as much as it's been a danger. The duke isn't the only one she's distracting, though. I hope you're still focused on your task."

"Of course." Orion shoved his hand through his hair, the sleeve of his coat nearly knocking his spectacles askew. "An illusion is an interesting idea, if we can manage it. He will test whatever gold we produce."

"That's where the real artistry comes in," Callon continued, tone warming as he explained his plan. "The enchantment will be bound to the real gold thread. As long as the thread remains unbroken and integrated with the flax, the illusion will hold. It's a temporary measure, of course, but it should buy you enough time to complete work on your firestone project."

Orion considered this, tugging his coat sleeves back in place. "How?"

"I will procure the enchantment from a master of illusory magic. She can weave the magic for us, binding it to a tool or item that will hold the actual enchantment. But," Callon cautioned, "this kind of magic requires precision and a willing participant.

Miss Millstone must be involved; her connection to the plants is the key to making the illusion seamless.”

“And the duke? How do we present it to him without arousing suspicion?”

“With confidence.” Callon grinned in a way that made Orion uneasy. “You present the enchanted flax as a breakthrough, but stress that it’s an early result, fragile and not yet ready for widespread replication.”

Slowly, Orion nodded. “Elara will claim that the process needs refinement, more research. It’ll sound plausible, especially coming from both of us.” The corners of Orion’s mouth twitched. “It might work.”

“It will,” Callon assured him. “But you’ll need to prepare. Work with Elara, get the flax ready, and I’ll have the enchantment to you as soon as possible. This ruse won’t hold forever, but in two days you will reveal your work, and the duke’s power over you will end.”

Orion extended his hand, and Callon shook it firmly. “Thank you, Callon. For everything.”

As Orion left, his heart raced. The plan was bold and fraught with risk, but it was their best chance. He couldn’t give Elara the enchantment as himself, of course. He’d have to do it as her mysterious visitor—the cloaked Fey she’d bargained with twice in her desperation. He only hoped she’d forgive him when she discovered his deception.



### Chapter

### Thirteen

The morning grew later, and Elara stood at the back of the duke's property, where a road separated the garden wall from the mews where horses and carriages were kept while the duke and his wealthy neighbors were in London.

The bales of flax fiber were being unloaded with an efficiency that sent waves of panic through her. Each bundle that passed through the gate felt like a tightening noose, a reminder of the impossible task at hand. Preparing dried straw, turning it to fiber for spinning, could take weeks.

But bundles of prepared flax fiber? The tow and line, short and long fibers, in big fluffy bundles, were taken directly to her workroom.

Her mind raced with worry, her thoughts a tangled mess of what-ifs and if-onlys. The mysterious visitor, her cloaked and masked confidant, had left her with a blanket tucked about her and her table much tidier than when he'd come. She'd found his hastily written—really, his penmanship was atrocious—draft of a report for the duke. She'd copied it out in her own handwriting. Yet the knot of fear in her stomach grew tighter with each passing moment.

She felt like screaming, right there in the road.

Then, as if summoned by her panicked thoughts, Orion appeared at her elbow. "Elara," he said, her name spoken with a calm that wrapped about her heart. "Good

morning.” He pushed his spectacles into place at the bridge of his nose.

His appearance was a stark contrast to her night visitor, yet somehow more reassuring. His hair was tousled, his attire rumpled, and there were dark shadows under his eyes that spoke of a night spent without rest. Yet the sight of him caused a warm, comforting sensation within her.

Orion stood close enough that their shoulders brushed. “You look better rested today,” he said, his eyes sweeping across the rest of her face. “I am glad of it.”

“Orion,” she breathed out. “I didn’t expect you so early.”

His gaze moved to take in the bundles as the servants took them indoors. “I wouldn’t leave you to face this alone,” he assured her, tone resolute. “Come inside. I know you haven’t eaten. We can take breakfast with your father in his sitting room.” He didn’t take her arm. Instead, he held out his hand. Already bare of gloves, the simple gesture held an intimacy that made her briefly hesitate.

Then she slipped her hand in his, and he entwined his fingers with hers as he tugged her along toward the house. She stared at their joined hands, her heart racing with awareness more than anxiety for the first time in days. Where his presence had been comforting, it was suddenly something more.

No. Not suddenly. The feeling that raced from her fingertips up her arm, through her veins and to her heart, had been there for a time. Yet she’d been so overwhelmed by all other sensation and thought that she hadn’t stopped to examine it properly. Hadn’t dared to, really.

Falling in love was the last thing she had expected, especially now. Indeed, it was foolish to entertain the thought—the feeling—for even an instant. Yet, as she listened to Orion speak, his voice steady and reassuring as he laid out a simple plan of

organization for the day, she couldn't deny the truth that unfurled within her as beautifully as a rosebud.

He had become her reason to hope, a source of light in the darkness that threatened to engulf her. But more than that. He was as the spring sun, warming the cold earth and encouraging the flowerbeds to awake, to shake away the frosts and let their bright petals unfurl to the waiting light.

"We can spend all of today cataloging everything," he reassured her again as they came to the door of the chambers she shared with her father. "Organizing. Making lists. The flax is from at least half a dozen different farms and crops, and we will need to take care in noting all the qualities of each variety." He grinned broadly at her. "We must be thorough, of course."

"Of course," she murmured, hardly aware of what she was agreeing to. He gave her hand a squeeze before he released it, the absence of his touch immediately jolting her back to an awareness of their surroundings. He opened the door and she followed him inside, a half step behind in body and a world away in her thoughts.

He greeted her father, who sat at a table with his nose buried in a book about the phases of the moon. Mr. Millstone put aside his reading and smiled broadly at the other man. "Mr. Fitzmartin, you are most welcome. Have you come for breakfast? Are you to help Elara with her project today?"

As Orion sat next to her father, speaking with animation of Mr. Millstone's studies regarding the implications of astronomical influences of alchemy, Elara ordered breakfast and bustled about the room, trying to order her thoughts. They were no less tidy than her workroom had been the evening before, and her emotions were in an even greater tangle.

The fear remained, as did the hope. But weaving through it all, like climbing roses up

a stony wall, were her feelings for Orion. And they climbed all the higher as Orion spoke with respect and kindness to her father, not discounting the man for what he had become, but seeing and honoring the knowledge he'd acquired and managed to hold onto through his change.

There was a tenderness in his actions, a genuine concern for her well-being and her father's that went beyond their shared goal. In the soft light of the sitting room, with the weight of the world pressing down upon them, she swallowed back tears when her father laughed at a joke Orion made about a mineral and a miller.

When had she last heard her father laugh?

"Excuse me a moment," she said abruptly, rising from their makeshift dining table and hurrying through the door to the bedroom. Bess was inside, tidying the bed and the cot where Elara slept at night in case her father had need of her. Sometimes, his dreams disturbed him.

"Miss." Bess curtsied then went back to fluffing a pillow. The maid, oblivious to his distress, said lightly, "I spoke to my mother yestereve."

Elara swept her hands down her skirt, then clutched at it, adding wrinkles where there hadn't been any before. "I hope she is well."

"Very." Bess took a step forward. "And she had a message for you. If you'll hear it."

Elara's attention sharpened. "Really? Why? She doesn't even know me."

"She's more Fey than I am," Bess said with a shrug. "And I've learned to give heed when she offers a word I didn't expect. Will you hear it?"

Again, the phrasing of Bess's question seemed important. "I will hear it."

The quality of Bess's voice changed when she spoke again. She sounded like herself. But also...not. "No matter what is asked of you, listen to your heart. It will guide you true."

She swallowed. "Thank you. And thank your mother for me."

"Oh, you oughtn't do that, miss." Bess's smile turned more feline. "Thanking a Fey for something freely given is almost as bad as making a bargain with one."

Elara blinked. "I thought you said to only worry over that for High Fey."

Bess's head tipped to one side. "Not 'only.' I said 'especially.'" She grinned, a friendly sort of expression. "Now, you've work to do. And a heart to listen to."

The only thing her heart had told her recently was not so much dangerous as distracting. How could Elara trust that? Falling in love with Orion—it was the worst possible time for such a thing. Now was not the time for declarations of affection or the exploration of budding emotions.

She had flax to catalog. A full day of work ahead. Work both meaningless and desperately important to keeping her father safe. And it threatened to undo her.

In the shadow of impending failure, Elara held onto the glimmer of hope that Orion represented. Love was a powerful force. Could it sustain her through the duke's wrath, if it came to that?

"No matter what is asked of you, listen to your heart. It will guide you true."

Everything had already been asked of her that possibly could be. The advice was horribly vague, yet she couldn't resent Bess or her mother for giving it. Bess's help and unexpected friendship had been a relief. Orion's willingness to aid her was an

even greater risk on his part. Whatever the outcome of this trial, at least she would not face it alone.

### Chapter

### Fourteen

The duke entered the workroom as Orion put on his coat to leave.

He had in his hands the sheaf of reports and information that Elara and Orion had worked to put together.

He dropped the papers in a stack onto the only clear spot of a table. Looked about the room. Gave the spinning wheel a skeptical glance. Then he spoke with the air of a man whose patience had run thin.

“Tomorrow. I want to see results.” He spoke no threat, yet one hung in the air just the same. He left without another word.

Elara looked at Orion with wide eyes.

“I’ll be back in the morning to help,” he promised, his mind already delving into the plan he and Callon had formed. Callon’s favor-owing friend had come through. Orion already had an enchanted object in his possession. He had but to deliver it as the cloaked helper, explain to Elara how to use it, and then?—

She dropped to her knees and buried her face in her hands, a sob wracking her body. “I cannot keep doing this. He’s going to find out it’s all a lie. My father—what will happen to him? To my sisters?”

Orion went to the ground and gathered her close, pulling her into his lap as she turned her face into his shoulder. Her whole body trembled. He rocked her gently, murmuring words of comfort against her hair. Quite without meaning to, he placed his lips against her forehead to feather kisses against her skin between his reassurances.

Elara lifted her head from Orion's shoulder, her eyes searching his. "How can you be so sure we'll make it through this?" she whispered, the fear still evident in her voice.

Orion, his resolve solidifying at her question, held her gaze. "Because we have to." His voice low but firm, continued, "Not just for your father, or your sisters, but for all of us who live under the shadow of demands we never agreed to shoulder. We will outsmart him, Elara. We have something he'll never understand."

"And what's that?" Elara asked, her breath hitching.

"Ingenuity. Courage. And the will to protect those we care about," Orion answered, helping her to her feet with gentle hands. "Trust me, Elara. Believe in me—in us." He kept hold of her hands, and at his gentle words, she gripped his fingers tighter with her own.

"I am desperate, Orion," she admitted. "How do you know we can do this?"

His heart, bruised on her behalf, took the lead. He enfolded her in his arms one more time. "Because we must. Because if we don't, I will lose you. And I could not bear that, my darling. Not when I have barely found you."

She stilled within his arms, then pushed back gently, lifting her gaze to his. Her eyes held surprise—and a question. Her lips parted, as though to ask it aloud, then pressed together again.



Perhaps it wasn't the time for confessions of love. Not when so much hung in the balance. Instead, he leaned forward enough to place a deliberate kiss on her forehead, and her sharp intake of breath made him smile. He stepped back, his hands sliding away from hers. "I have a duty to see to this night. I hate to leave you like this."

"Yet you must." She tipped her head to one side and her eyes narrowed up at him. "Orion?"

"Yes?"

Her brow furrowed. "The night I arrived was the duke's masquerade. Were you there?"

His heart skipped. "I was there." He couldn't reveal himself yet. He had to get everyone safe first.

Elara did not follow that line of questioning any farther. She only nodded, then stepped back. "You must attend to your business. I will do my best in your absence to prepare for tomorrow." She gave him a tired smile when he hesitated. "Good evening, Orion. Until tomorrow."

He bowed. "Until then." And he left, the thought that she had discovered his secret itching at his thoughts.

Hours later, Orion navigated the shadowed grounds of the park with a weariness that seeped into his bones. The cloak he wore felt heavier than usual. Tucked beneath one arm, he carried a distaff. An item resembling a weathered broom handle more than a true tool. But the magic with which it had been imbued was strong enough to conjure illusions. A favor paid back to Callum from someone with obvious power.

Power that Orion knew only High Fey could command.

The night was deep, the park mostly quiet, save for the occasional creak of tree limbs or the distant call of a bird.

Orion's mind, by contrast, felt far too full of noise. The day had been long, starting with the early hours spent in Elara's company, a time that had become the most cherished part of his day. Then, the evening had been consumed by intense work with Greta as they worked to solve an issue with the steam engine designed to utilize the firestone.

As he stepped through the portal, the sight of Elara, hunched over her notes, her face etched with lines of fatigue and worry, struck a chord in his heart. The urge to comfort her, to take away the stress that shadowed her features, was overwhelming. He cleared his throat softly, announcing his presence, and watched as she lifted her head, her eyes widening in surprise and, he fancied, a flicker of relief. Until she saw what he held. Then she frowned at him.

He set the distaff across the table with care, his fingers brushing against the wood that hummed with latent magic. "This is no ordinary piece of wood. This is an enchanted distaff. With a single gold thread to start your work, the illusion the staff casts will make the flax appear as if it's been spun into gold."

He watched her rise, her movements slow, as if the weight of the world rested on her shoulders. She approached him, her gaze fixed on the staff with a mix of curiosity and skepticism. Orion took a moment to explain how the enchantment worked, how she must imbue her will on the flax to look like the gold, just as she used her will to make flowers be more than flowers. He was all the while acutely aware of her proximity. The air between them seemed charged, filled with an awareness that had nothing to do with the task at hand.

Perhaps he imagined it.

Elara went to a bundle of fiber and arranged it. Tugging, pulling, laying it out. Then she wrapped it around the distaff, securing it in place with a ribbon. He drew out the first fiber for her as she settled before the spinning wheel.

“Now for the gold.” He took out the spool from the pocket of his cloak.

She took it in her hands with a humorless laugh. “There isn’t much.”

“It will be enough.” He watched her use it as a lead for the rest of the fiber. Adding it in with the material that could only ever be linen thread—thread that had to pass for gold long enough for him to set them all free of the duke’s clutches.

She worked the spinning wheel treadle with a steady, slow rhythm. As though she had spun thread from flax all her life. As he watched Elara working the wheel, he allowed himself a moment to reflect on the depth of his feelings for her. She was no longer only a responsibility, a person he needed to protect; she had become someone he cared for deeply, someone whose happiness had become essential to his own.

The thought of what would happen once it was all over, once they thwarted the duke, filled him with a sense of dread. Would they go their separate ways, their connection severed by the return to their respective lives? Or was there a chance for something more, a future in which they could explore the feelings that had quietly grown between them?

As Elara focused on the spinning wheel, her mind bent on mastering the illusion, Orion watched with admiration for her strength. He wanted to believe they would find a way to remain in each other’s lives, that the bond they had formed would not be easily broken.

“Remember, it’s all about the illusion,” he reminded her, his voice tight with an emotion he couldn’t hide.

Elara looked up at him, her eyes searching his. Then, with a nod, she turned her attention back to the spinning wheel, the golden glow of the enchanted flax illuminating her face with soft radiance.

Orion stepped back, watching her work, the realization settling in his heart that no matter what the future held, he would do everything in his power to ensure her safety and happiness. And as he made his quiet exit, leaving her to the magic of the spinning wheel, he left behind his heart.

### Chapter

### Fifteen

A deep, unpleasant laugh woke Elara. She'd moved to the old wingback chair after working until her fingers were worn raw and red. Another hour at the spinning wheel, and her fingers would have bled from spinning the fiber. She'd stumbled to the chair shortly after dawn and collapsed.

The duke's laugh had woken her. He stood at the wheel, his back to her, hands full of golden-hued thread. Lumpy, ill-formed, thread. She hadn't spun since childhood, and even then it had been wool that her mother had brought for her to use. The result wouldn't be ideal for sewing or cloth, but the duke didn't seem to care. Not so long as he thought it was true gold.

She belatedly realized she couldn't sit in the presence of a duke, and Elara scrambled to her feet without falling over from the clumsiness of fatigue.

His eyes glittered darkly with greed and triumph. "Miss Millstone. You have done it." He held out the gold thread. "And tonight, I will show my allies the proof of your work."

Her heart skipped and rose hopefully. Yet in the next instant, it sunk again. "You will not allow me to go home, though, will you?"

"Home?" He laughed again. "Why would you ever want to return there? When you can stay here, where you have all the elegance and finery a talent such as yours

deserves. Or, perhaps, I should send you to one of my estates. Give you an honor guard, of sorts. For once others learn of your talents, you most certainly will not be safe.” His lips turned up into a cold mockery of a smile. “I couldn’t bear for anything to happen to you, Miss Millstone. And your father—he knows the secret to turning flax to gold, too. You must both be protected. Surely, you see that.” He looked down at the thread again. “You ought to rest, my dear. You will need to be at your best to perform this feat again.”

She didn’t say anything, nor did she curtsy as he left, but the man was too distracted by his own greed to notice.

Her gaze went to the tapestry on the wall.

“He will come,” she told herself.

With that hope dampening her fear enough for her to function, Elara left the room to find her father.

On the outskirts of London, far from the duke’s home, Orion and Greta stood beside a gleaming steam engine, its sides polished to a reflective shine. The track was all but deserted. The air was crisp, a prelude to the day’s beginning, as a small group of well-dressed lawmakers gathered inside the engine’s carriage, murmuring among themselves with a mix of skepticism and intrigue.

Callon addressed the assembly. “Ladies and gentlemen, what you’re about to witness is not merely an innovation but a revolution in transportation and energy use, made possible by Mr. Fitzmartin’s groundbreaking work with firestone.”

Greta, her hands confidently adjusting the valves and gauges, nodded to Orion. With a shared glance of determination, Orion fed half a dozen rocks of firestone into the engine’s core. The stone glowed, a vibrant heart igniting with potential, as the steam

engine began to hum.

As the engine started, the politicians leaned closer to the windows, whatever skepticism they'd felt falling away as they gasped and shouted in awe. The steam engine, powered by the firestone, moved along the track with unprecedented efficiency, pouring out none of the noxious smoke for which the coal-driven engines were known.

Callon's voice carried over the thrumming of the engine. "With firestone, we eliminate the soot, the smoke, and the inefficiency of coal. This is a healthier energy, the future of our industry and our world. Why should we tolerate our cities filling with an unhealthy miasma? Mr. Fitzmartin's vision offers us a path to a brighter future."

The demonstration, brief yet undeniably successful, ended with the steam engine coming to a gentle stop, the lawmakers stepping out onto the platform, their faces alight with realization and excitement.

Orion, standing beside the engine, accepted their congratulations. Answered their questions. And, best of all, received promises and assurances that these men and women would invest in his work and stand for him in parliament.

Another demonstration was scheduled for the next day.

Greta turned to Orion, her usually stoic expression lightened by the slightest of smiles. "It seems we accomplished something here today, Mr. Fitzmartin." She offered him a hearty handshake.

Callon joined them, clapping Orion on the back with a smile that spoke volumes. "Orion, Greta, you've both outdone yourselves. This demonstration wasn't merely successful; it was revolutionary." His gaze swept over the engine and then back to

Orion.

“Thank you, both of you. Now, I have another matter to see to. A personal one that requires my immediate attention.”

Greta nodded and climbed back inside the engine without a backward glance. Pragmatic as ever.

Callon offered a knowing look. “Go, then. We’ll handle things here. I hope you’ll introduce me to Miss Millstone someday.”

“Someday very soon,” Orion promised. With that, he turned and made his way swiftly from the track, his heart lightened by the success of the morning.



### Chapter

### Sixteen

Under cloak of night, Elara sat in the dimly lit workroom, her father beside her. Each tick of the clock echoed through the room like a heartbeat, marking the time until their departure. She glanced at her father, who, engrossed in his notes, remained oblivious to the tension that filled his daughter.

Bess had agreed to help conceal their absence from the duke's servants as long as possible, a task that carried its own risks. Elara felt a surge of gratitude for the maid's kindness and willingness to aid them.

The room, filled with the scent of drying herbs and the soft rustle of pages turning, hadn't precisely become dear to her. Yet she couldn't help gazing at it with a small sense of loss.

The room was arranged for their departure, though to anyone else, it might simply appear as a night's work left unfinished. A few open books lay scattered about, alongside Elara's notes and sketches. It was a scene she had meticulously planned to avoid arousing suspicion, giving no hint as to their impending flight.

She now awaited the arrival of her cloaked helper. Elara couldn't explain how she knew, but she sensed he would come for them that night. Perhaps it was the whispered conversations with Bess, a slight shift in the air, or simply hope manifesting as intuition. Whatever the reason, she felt an unexplainable certainty that they would leave the duke behind.

Her father murmured something under his breath, a calculation or a musing, lost in the world of his research. Elara admired his ability to find solace in his work, even amidst the turmoil that surrounded them. She wished she could borrow some of that focus, to shield herself against the swirling fears that overwhelmed her.

A soft stirring of cloth against stone broke the silence, causing Elara's heart to leap. She glanced at her father to find him undisturbed by the sound. She rose, her hands trembling, and faced the tapestry. Her father, ever absorbed in his work, barely registered the disruption.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself for what was to come.

The tapestry lifted and revealed a figure shrouded in a cloak, his face obscured by a mask. It was him, come to guide them into the unknown.

The masked man halted in surprise, then glanced toward her father, before coming further into the room. Raising his gloved hand toward her. "The illusion worked."

"Yes." She put her hand in his. "And we're leaving now, aren't we?"

Slowly, his head dipped in a nod. "I have a safe place for you both." She saw his throat bob with a swallow. "But first, I must tell you?—"

She stepped closer, cutting him off by placing a hand along his jaw, beneath the edge of his mask. "I know. There must be a payment for that sort of magic. Mustn't there?"

He started to shake his head, but Elara stopped him with a look. "In fairy stories, this is the moment when you ask for something grand. Something unexpected. And practically impossible to give."

His eyes narrowed and he tipped his head slightly, settling his jaw against her palm.

“It sounds as though you have something specific you wish to offer, Miss Millstone.”

She lowered her voice. “I do. But I wonder if you want it?” Her heart trembled, and she wanted to take off the mask. Wanted to kiss him. But what if the man who had risked everything for her didn’t feel the same? He had come so close to saying something before—she’d felt it. Surely, he had to know she’d guessed his identity. Discovered who he was when her heart spoke to his.

One corner of his mouth went upward. “I could ask that your firstborn child be mine. That seems impossible to give.”

“And yet, I would promise you that.”

His head pulled back and his eyes widened with shock. “You would?”

She shushed him after glancing over her shoulder, making certain her father still worked with his back to them. Then she glared up at her mysterious savior. “I am most willing for my firstborn to be yours. If the offer of fathering the child comes with an offer of marriage, of course.”

His lips parted in surprise. “Fathering ? —? ”

She let her hand rest against his chest. “You said my firstborn had to be yours. Both of ours, really. And I accept your terms. If you’re asking me to marry you.” Then she lifted his mask as she whispered his name, “Orion Fitzmartin.”

His heart’s rhythm sped beneath her hand where it rested on his chest, and he did not wait another moment to bend and catch her lips with his. The kiss was all too brief, but when he glanced over her shoulder again, she couldn’t mind. They were still in the duke’s home, in danger, and in her father’s presence.

It was time to go.

“We can discuss acceptable forms of payment later,” she said with a smile. “For now, please. Will you take us from this place? The duke isn’t at home. He’s off showing all his associates the golden thread. I cannot stay here another minute. Neither of us can.”

He let her keep the mask. “Then we will be on our way. Get your father. Take his arm.” It did not take much to persuade her father to come for a walk with her and Orion, a man he’d deemed a “most excellent fellow.”

With one arm linked with her papa and the other with Orion, she let him guide her as they stepped through the stone wall and into a tunnel. Then, in another blink of her eyes, they stood beneath the moon, surrounded by trees.

“Hyde Park,” her father said at once, eyeing the grounds with intelligent interest. “A fascinating place. Did you know there are old druid stones in this part of the park? I studied them once, with a naturalist friend of mine.”

Orion chuckled. “I knew. One day, you will have to tell me what you made of them being here.” Orion released her arm to lead her through the trees and onto a moonlit walking path. In the distance, she heard a horse snort and the soft jingle of harnesses. They came to a coach, though it wasn’t Orion’s. He helped first her father and then Elara inside.

“Where are we going?” Elara dared ask once he’d joined them and closed the door.

“The house of a friend, outside of London. You will be safe there for another few days. The duke will be too busy to come looking for you.”

Elara, seated beside her father, shook her head. “I don’t understand. Why now?”

“Tomorrow, all the newspapers will print a story about a locomotive—a large one, too—powered without coal. Without creating smoke and dust. Eye-witnesses will

share the wonder of it. And in the afternoon, I will make another demonstration before the Prime Minister and Her Royal Majesty, the Queen.”

Her papa’s gasp made her start with surprise. “Running an engine without coal? How can it be done? Alchemy?”

She felt Orion’s smile through the dark and heard it in his words. “No. Magic, and engineering. I will share all my research with you, Mr. Millstone. First thing in the morning, you have my word.”

“I suppose I will content myself with that.” Her father looked between them, the soft light of the carriage’s exterior lamp showing his expression of amusement well enough. “This whole straw into gold business has been quite bothersome, hasn’t it? I think it is time for me to turn my thoughts elsewhere. Perhaps to your work, Mr. Fitzmartin. Though I hope we will have more to speak of than work. Given the way my daughter smiles whenever in your presence, it seems there will plenty of time for us to come to understand one another.”

“Papa!” Elara laughed, but in the next moment she moved to sit next to Orion. “We haven’t known each other long at all. Poor Orion may soon wish to himself rid of me.”

His fingers slid through hers, and he held her hand near his heart. “Never, my Elara. Besides, we still have that debt to settle.”

Elara rested her head against his shoulder. Safe. Happy. Ready to face whatever came next, so long as she had Orion with her. Once they were safe, she would write to her sisters. Tell them everything. Perhaps even have them rejoin her. She doubted Orion would mind.

Then she intended to spend the rest of her life dividing her time between her love, her family, and a garden. A very grand garden, where she could practice her magic and

learn how to wield it better for the benefit of others.

Whatever came next, as dawn broke and the carriage left London behind for the rolling hills of the country, she intended to live each day with hope and courage.

Orion kissed her temple as the carriage turned up a country lane. “I promise you one thing, my love. I will do all in my power to ensure that—for the rest of our days—we will live happily, ever after.”