



The Soulless Prince

(Borderland Princes Fairytale Retelling #2)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: A magical dream-world. A soulless prince. And a crazy, cat-lady on a mission.

Tabitha Brewer has always had a thing for cats. They became her family after leaving her previous life as a poor, neglected street urchin. And when one of the quirky creative's beloved strays goes missing—right after she learns he was an enchanted prince—she can't get him out of her mind or her dreams.

But when parts of her dreams bleed into the waking world, Tabitha realizes that the only way to rescue her former feline companion is to leave her home at the second-hand dress-shop behind and step into a faerie realm filled with every single danger she could possibly imagine.

And Tabitha has always had an exceptional imagination.

Can an eccentric, shut-in with far too many cats defeat a powerful fae queen, return the heart and soul of her kingdom's stolen prince, and build a love with someone without whiskers? Or will she lose herself to a magical dream-world just as deadly as her own imagination?

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Chapter 1

Of Broken Dreams

Tabitha Brewer often had dreams about a mystical faerie land, where everything was much brighter than the world she currently knew. Her world was a place where a devastating plague ran through the winter streets of Castletown and had recently killed its queen. A place where Tabitha's mother's sunken cheeks deepened as she sorted through a donation box left on their door—matchsticks, blankets, and the like. “Useless,” she said, straining her back and letting out a frustrated sigh. “If they really wanted to help us, they could have given us some proper coin.”

Tabitha stayed quiet, head down in their small room. It was better that way. Nothing for her mother to criticize.

Her mother's sharp gaze soon found her anyway. Though her mother was still the same dark-haired beauty men would fight at the bar for when she worked as a serving girl, their fortunes had turned. She thrust the open crate in front of Tabitha. “Tabitha. Go and sell these. Don't come home until they are gone.”

Tabitha took the box and fled outside the boarding house, moving so quickly that she didn't look over the donations herself. Not until she reached a corner of Market Street where she thought she could try her hand at selling. She frowned. A few packets of dry food lay on the bottom of the open crate. Her stomach growled at the sight, but her mother must know best.

They needed the coin more.

Chill wind pulled at her long hair and ran up her patchwork skirt. Dusk was falling. Tabitha would have to work quickly to get home before she froze. She looked left and right for potential customers, but there weren't many people on the snow-laden streets. No one quite knew how the plague was spreading, but most agreed it was better to stay indoors and away from strangers.

Especially on an evening like this.

Still, Tabitha had to try. "Matchsticks for sale! Perfect for a cold winter night!"

No response. Eventually a cat wandered over to her from a nearby alleyway. The fluffy ginger Tabitha called Biscuit was only half-grown and far too skinny, but Tabitha didn't have any of her own food to give her. Not tonight.

Guilt still crept over her at the sight. Tabitha loved to feed any stray cat she found, and sometimes, when she dreamed of her faerie land, she thought she might have a dozen cats and more than enough food to care for them all.

"Don't look at me like that," she said when the guilt became too much. "We need proper coin to pay the landlord—not food or matchsticks. But you . . . maybe you could find Tom? He can probably find a few rats for you."

Tom was a sleek brown tabby and her favorite of the stray cats she knew, even though she had only met him a few months earlier. There was just something about him—like he somehow understood everything she said. And after their first meeting—where Tabitha combed out his fur and gave him some of her own dinner scraps—he always seemed to have something to share with the others.

He was the best hunter in the whole group.

He even brought her some food once, and not by trying to share one of his rats like a

normal cat might. He had carried her a small branch with a few wild berries and then led her out to the forest to find the whole bush. He was almost a faerie dream all by himself. And wouldn't that have been wonderful? A cat who could walk and talk and be a truer friend than anything human?

Thinking of her faerie dreams, she considered her box of donations again. What would it be like to actually use them? Tabitha spied a potential customer and tried a new approach. "Matchsticks for sale! Guaranteed to transport you to a brighter, more magical world!"

"That's a pretty way of putting it," the gray-haired woman said with a wink and a wrinkled smile. She and her husband were bundled up and walking the streets together. "You always have such a clever way with words—a mark of a true saleswoman. Or even an artist."

Tabitha smiled hopefully. "Would you like a matchstick, Granny Tailor?"

The woman glanced at her husband, then nodded. "Sure, love. We can spare a few coins. Just be sure to spend a few of them on yourself."

Tabitha could never do that. If her mother caught her stealing, she would get the switch for sure. But she nodded as she took the woman's coin.

"Here. Take this as well." The soft-spoken tailor took off his scarf and handed it to her. "It's too cold of a night to be out here without one."

Tabitha flushed as she mumbled her thanks. Her mother might not want her to take the scarf—or anything that wasn't coin—but she didn't want to be rude.

Maybe she could sell it after they were gone?

But it was warm. And such a bright and cheery shade of blue that matched the tailor's eyes.

She would sell it last if she could.

After both of the Tailors left, Tabitha looked at her box again, trying to determine what to sell next. Not the scarf and not the food, but maybe the blankets?

A dark shadow fell over her. "Not nice to con a sweet old couple out of their savings like that," said a gruff male voice.

Tabitha started, looking up at the dark-haired man who now towered over her. A scarf and rough beard hid most of his face, but he wasn't one of the normal city guards. He had the silver and black uniform of one of the king's men. And he must have been lurking somewhere in the dark—watching her.

She swallowed a few times before finding her words again. "Wh . . . what do you mean?"

He tilted his head at her wares. "Those matchsticks. They're donations from the revered matrons and the crown. I spent a half-day in this ungrateful dump helping to deliver them, and you can see the royal fox on the crate. Why should anyone have to pay for something you got for free?"

Tabitha shuddered and took a step back from the box. Selling on the street wasn't legal without a proper charter, but most of the city guards were willing to look the other way with the plague going on. Or at least, she had never had any trouble before—besides her mother cursing her if she came home without selling everything she had. "Mother wanted me to sell them. We need coin. The rent is due . . ."

The man raised an eyebrow. "Is it? And does the landlord know what sort he's

lending to?”

Tabitha looked down at her patchwork dress self-consciously. She had stitched on the patches the best she could—forming a decorative pattern—and combed out her sable-brown hair, but she knew what she looked like.

Gutter scum.

The man still leered at her narrow figure, coming closer. “How old are you now, girl? Old enough to know how your mother spends her days . . . and her nights.”

Tabitha was thirteen. She might be old enough to suspect there was more to her mother’s unstable moods and late-night activities than the woman would share, but Tabitha never wanted to know the truth of it. It was just the rent. Times were tough for everyone.

The man clicked his tongue at her. “And now here you are, all grown up and ready to follow in your mother’s footsteps; panhandling and selling unlawful goods is a crime in Castletown. I would only be doing my job if I reported you . . . Or perhaps, you could give me a reason to look the other way?”

He took another step toward her, and she took a step back. Closer to the alleyway.

She didn’t see anyone else on the street, and her voice caught in her throat. Tabitha knew all the matron stories and she believed them, too. But she was not someone a faerie would wish to lend their magic to, not someone that a prince would rush to aid.

She wasn’t anyone at all—Tabitha knew it, and this man seemed to know it too.

His arm came up behind her, trapping her in. “Your mother put her nose up one too many times for my liking, always thinking she’s worth more. But you give me what I

want, don't make a sound, and I'll give you the coin you're looking for. You can even keep the rest of your matchsticks. It's a fair trade, and I promise your mother won't mind."

Tabitha's whole body trembled with something more than cold. She wanted to tell him he was wrong. Her mother only intended her to sell the donation items and nothing else.

Her mother wouldn't want her to sell anything else, would she?

But truthfully, Tabitha wasn't sure. She didn't know who her father was. Her mother often cursed him as a rotten deserter who never wanted a child. But her maternal grandfather had been a brewer, and her mother could make her coin as a server at the alehouse he supplied. That was until the plague shut the alehouse and other indoor meeting places down. Now, coin was always short, and her mother's temper could be a frightful thing.

Perhaps even more frightening than the man in the street.

The man backed away then, but only to reach into the donation box. He grabbed one of the remaining matchsticks and snapped it in half. "Oops. You best hurry and make your mind up, girl. My offer doesn't have to stay so sweet."

He reached for a packet of coffee next, like he planned to rip open the bag and spoil it.

Granny Tailor had just praised Tabitha for the gift of her clever words and an active imagination, but it could easily become a curse. Tabitha could imagine all the terrible things this man could do to her if she continued to refuse him.

He would keep breaking her matchsticks—everything she had left.

He wouldn't give her the promised coin.

At best, she would come home to her mother empty-handed.

At worst, he wouldn't take "no" for an answer, and she might not come home at all.

The guard ripped open the coffee sack. Her breath came in sharp gasps. All she could hear was the ripping and the beat of her own heart.

Then, a yowl and a curse.

She looked up to see the guard trip into the open crate with a great thump . The wooden box snapped under his bulk, and an angry tom cat was scratching his face—white paws flashing through the hazy gray.

Tabitha ran.

She reached the other side of the market before she stopped, shaking with fear and cold. She couldn't think, had no notion of where she could go.

She wished and wished for a dream world that would never appear—not for a girl like her.

That horrible man had just proven it.

Great spots covered her vision. Something in the shadows moved, and something in the wind called her name. Perhaps she could really see another world in the inky unknown?

Silky fur rubbed against her ankles before she could bring herself to move toward the half-formed image.

Still trembling, she picked up the cat. “Tom. Oh, Tom.”

His fur was soft. His hazel-green eyes were wide with what had to be sympathy. And he had saved her. He was only a cat, but he had acted as her prince and might be her only true friend in all of Castletown.

That was when she started to cry. “I can’t go home. Mother said I couldn’t, not until I sold all the matchsticks.”

Her mother often cursed her if she couldn’t sell all that she was meant to. Even threatened Tabitha with a switch. What would her mother do if she came home without anything at all?

The man would have spoiled everything by now.

“I can’t go home,” she realized, but she quickly wiped her tears away. She might indulge herself later, but nothing would be helped by crying now. “What can I do instead? We don’t have any more matchsticks, and we’ll freeze if we stay out here.”

“Mer -row?” Tom reached one of his white paws to the bright blue scarf that was still around her neck. It was almost a cat-hug, something Tom had never done before.

It was sweet that he cared, but this wasn’t a dream world, and a brown tabby cat couldn’t help her any more than her tears.

Somehow, she had to find a place for them both. Out of the cold and the coming night.

The thought of providing a proper shelter for one of her beloved strays made her braver than she could ever be on her own. Tabitha straightened the cat in her arms, knocking on one silent door and then another until Tom meowed and pawed at the

scarf again. That's when she remembered. The Tailors. They had their own shop in the outer-row of the city, where they mostly restored old dresses and other clothes.

She knocked on the door as soon as she found it, and Granny Tailor answered.

Tabitha steeled herself before rushing forward with her words. "I'm sorry to bother you, Granny, but I wondered if you meant what you said about me being a good saleswoman. And if perhaps you could use a good saleswoman in your shop."

The woman blinked, looking her up and down. "How old are you, child?"

"I'm fifteen." Tabitha straightened her stance. The man on the street seemed to think that she was older than she was. She was tall for her true age of thirteen but gangly, thin, and absent of any womanly curves; it might be an obvious lie, but an important one.

In Castletown, a girl of twelve or thirteen might take the lighter duties of an apprenticeship with her parents' blessing.

A girl of fifteen or sixteen could do it on her own.

The silence that followed was agony, but then the woman widened the door opening. Warmth spilled out of the threshold like a portal to another world. "Well, you certainly need someone to teach you to sew that dress up properly. Come in out of the cold. You and that cat both."

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Chapter 2

Dream Merchant

Seven years had passed, and Tabitha still had a home at the Tailors' second-hand shop. As such, she spent her days forcing a smile and speaking to a few shoppers in the rehearsed and surface-level way that no longer triggered her anxiety. "Yes, Goody Baker," she said. "I'm sure I can fix the trim on that apron for you if you want to leave it—"

"Tabitha!" a well-dressed woman cried from the doorway, breaking through the threshold like all the kingdoms were at war. "I need your help."

Tom wasn't there, but all the shop-cats shifted in response to the noise—the most timid ones running under the display mannequins.

Tabitha forced a smile and found her voice on their behalf. "What's the matter, Lady Sabine?"

"It's that awful, backstabbing merchant's daughter!" Lady Sabine spat out the words as she and a younger maid put down their bundles of silk. "She isn't even noble, but her family has all that new money, and I tried to be kind, you know? Help her get the lay of things? I told her I was going to wear white ribbons in my dress, and she has gone and had her seamstress copy the whole design. Could you possibly do something different for me? Something new? I know the wedding is little more than a week away, but you're always so creative, and I really must do something."

“What wedding?” Tabitha asked, falling behind as she had been trying to mime her silent apologies to the exiting baker’s wife and give proper deference to the new noble client at once.

“ What wedding? ” The young woman had been untying her cloak but froze mid-motion to show her disbelief. “Princess Ainsley’s wedding, of course. Didn’t you know? I thought you were close with the princess. She was the one to recommend you, after all.”

“Princess Ainsley recommended me.” That made sense. Lady Sabine and a few other younger noble women were newer patrons of the second-hand shop. They spent more coin than their village counterparts and requested fanciful and unique revisions to their elaborate gowns that sent Tabitha’s imagination soaring, so she wasn’t about to complain about their presence, but she had wondered.

Women like them didn’t belong in a small shop so far on the outskirts of town.

“Yes. Wait. No. Oh, I’m sorry.” Lady Sabine dropped her arms to her sides dramatically. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you who recommended you, but I was just so surprised. Whose wedding? She’s only been inviting the whole of Castletown, and how in the kingdoms am I supposed to stand out if I’m wearing the same gown as that blighted, common-born minx?”

The young maid tried to soothe her overwrought mistress, and a few of the cats came back out of hiding to sniff at the newcomers.

Tabitha quickly regathered herself to look at the dress in question. It was finely made, but colorless and bland. Something made to reflect the effects of the plague over the whole kingdom.

But it had been a few years, and with the princess’s wedding—surely a few bright

colors to celebrate wouldn't be amiss?

The possibilities called to Tabitha, the dull gown beckoning to her like a blank canvas. Then Tabitha could see it, the young lady wearing just a hint of scarlet in her multilayered skirts and catching the eye of a roguish noble from a rival house. Their fiery romance would be the talk of Castletown and completely fulfill all the lady's fantastic and melodramatic dreams.

Tabitha's fingers twitched eagerly for the task. "I can fix it for you." Now that she had caught the vision, she simply had to.

Lady Sabine's head perked up like a hopeful and tentative garden gnome. "Are you sure? You aren't busy redoing a dress for yourself? It is to be the event of the season, and everyone is going to be there."

"No. I mean, yes, I will do your gown. I wasn't planning on going." That kind of crowd would be far too much for Tabitha to manage on her own, even if she had wanted to.

It wasn't that she didn't like people, but when thoughts of all their dreams and potential stories hit her at once—it was just too much.

Lady Sabine couldn't stand for the scandal. "But surely you must go. Surely the princess wants you to. Aren't the two of you friends?"

That was a complicated question. Tabitha didn't mind the noble clients. Their high-minded and frivolous ways reminded her of her cats, and she had no trouble ducking her head for them.

But the princess . . . she was different, wasn't she?

It wasn't a conversation Tabitha felt able to have right now, and she quickly distracted Lady Sabine by holding up her gown and talking about some changes that could be made to the design— of course it was agreed that a tasteful hint of scarlet would be just the thing for her.

After the easily distracted and satisfied lady left, there was another dress and another customer to attend to. Not a noble client, but Tabitha could still see how much the shape of the woman's figure would improve just by tailoring the simple dress she wanted to size.

And wouldn't that be another marvelous dream, if the hardworking and downcast farmer's wife could wear the dress and regain a bit of the confidence she had as a much younger woman?

Tabitha's fingers twitched again, just as eager to see that project done as the noble woman's gown. And there was the baker's wife's apron that had been left earlier. Just imagine all the decadent treats that would be made while wearing that! Maybe she could embroider the straps, to reinforce them like the woman wanted, but also add a bit of flare?

Tabitha worked steadily until an elderly woman came in, her words stopping Tabitha short.

"Well," Granny Tailor said with an air of gruff satisfaction. "I would apologize for being away for so long, but it doesn't look like you've needed me here at all."

Tabitha froze. She hadn't been expecting Granny Tailor today, even if it was her shop. Had Tabitha left anything out of place? She couldn't remember, but she had to say something .

"You don't have to apologize for taking some time off—not when your husband . . ."

Tabitha couldn't quite say it. Her heart raced, and her throat dried up. These weren't the rehearsed and fanciful words she might use to address a customer, and the thought of the tailor's recent death still brought a tear to her eye, even with the promise of spring warming the air.

He never spoke much, but he had such a warm and grandfatherly air. Tabitha had loved him fiercely.

Granny Tailor sighed with her own tightly controlled grief. "Yes, there are a lot of memories here, but you know that isn't the only thing keeping me away. The walk from our old house seems farther every year, especially when there isn't someone to walk beside me. And with the children all more than grown, I can't see any practical reason to keep it."

"You want to sell the house?" Tabitha nodded, trying to keep the news from reaching her chest. She had lived at the shop for years, but she couldn't be selfish. It was natural for Granny Tailor to wish to downsize with her husband's recent death and her own failing health. The elderly woman didn't want to keep a separate house anymore, and the shop was hers by right.

The logic of the choice didn't stop the wave of anxiety that inevitably followed. Tabitha looked to the cats. But Tom still wasn't there, so she moved from the counter and quickly busied her hands with one of the display dresses to calm her nerves. "Yes," she said with forced and well-practiced cheerfulness. "Of course. I can move my things from the loft so you can stay here."

Granny Tailor blinked at her. "Me? In the loft?" Her aged voice cracked in surprise. "And where will you stay? There's hardly room up there for more than one person—not unless we were to sleep on top of one another. How you fit all those cats up there, I'll never know."

Tabitha flushed. Granny Tailor never said much about the cats, but sometimes Tabitha wondered if the elderly woman had expected that when she let in a half-starved street-girl with one cat in her arms, she would soon be giving sanctuary for nearly a dozen more. “I’ll manage.”

She would have to. She had reached her twentieth year. She wasn’t just a frightened young girl anymore, and there had to be a way for her to provide for her own future.

“Tabitha, I’m barely in this shop anymore,” the elderly woman said, turning serious. “I don’t see well enough to do the right kind of stitching, and I doubt I could manage that old loft-ladder, either.”

Tabitha frowned, unsure what Granny Tailor could possibly be implying.

The elderly woman sighed. “It doesn’t matter, does it? You’ve been living here for all this time, and you still expect me to cast you out without a word?”

Tabitha hesitated. She knew it wasn’t fair. Granny Tailor had a gruff outspokenness about her, but she had a kindness too. She never made unreasonable demands or threats.

She never left Tabitha hungry or cold.

But somehow, something in Tabitha’s bones still expected it to end that way.

She had always had an excellent imagination, after all.

“Darling, you know I have loved your creative spirit from the start. But don’t you think you’re worth a few dreams of your own? The shop is yours. It has been for the last few years—you’re the only reason we still have such loyal and noble clients coming here. This just makes it more formal.” Granny Tailor pulled an official-

looking document from her apron and put it on the till.

Tabitha stared, feeling a bit light-headed as her vision blurred. She reached for one of her cats to steady her. It was like stepping into another world; she truly had never expected Granny Tailor to leave her the shop. But though she was still an unlearned street girl, she could read enough of the revised deed to recognize her own name written in black and white.

It just couldn't be right. "But your daughters? Won't they be upset?" Granny Tailor had three grown daughters and a whole herd of grandchildren. Tabitha sat in an awkward space between them—not quite old enough to be counted as a daughter, but not quite young enough to be a grandchild. Sometimes they all gathered about the shop to trade dress patterns and dinner recipes, and Tabitha could imagine she was part of the family too.

But that was just another faerie dream; she knew it wasn't true.

Surely one of them would want the shop and hate her for taking it from them?

Granny Tailor only laughed. "Oh, they never wanted the place. Why would they? They always wanted adventures far from home, and now they have too much to deal with in their own families. No, your dreams are different from theirs, and this place is a much better fit for you."

Something inside of Tabitha flinched at the words. She should have been grateful. She certainly wanted to be. But there had been something in Granny Tailor's voice that seemed to match Lady Sabine's scandalized shriek after the young noblewoman had learned that Tabitha didn't plan to attend the princess's wedding. This might be a more subtle rebuke. Or perhaps it wasn't a true rebuke at all, and only the guilty whispers of Tabitha's own trampled heart and discarded dreams? Granny Tailor's daughters wouldn't want the shop because they were proper goodwives, having

children and dozens of their own adventures, fulfilling their lives in every measurable way, but Tabitha was not.

And perhaps she never would.

Throughout the Borderland Kingdoms, many respectable girls secured an engagement with an eager beau at sixteen and were married by seventeen—the same year they came of age.

It wasn't uncommon for a more discerning young lady to wait until well into her twenties to properly settle down—they were part of a modern and progressive society, after all—but Tabitha had reached her twentieth year and had never even walked out with a man. Not on purpose anyway. Though, with the rumors that followed after her late mother (who had died the same year her daughter abandoned her) many assumed Tabitha was loose. Penniless and loose and practically tongue-tied with strangers. Not the sort of girl a proper gentleman (or even a goodman of any class or trade) would seek for a bride.

Most of the time, she didn't mind. She had her cats. She had her work.

And now she had sole ownership of the second-hand dress shop as Granny Tailor wouldn't hear any more arguments about the matter. The elder woman was moving in with her eldest daughter, the paperwork had all been signed, and it seemed that the shop would be Tabitha's, whether she wanted it or not. But as Granny Tailor left just before closing, Tabitha was forced to admit that she didn't notice her absence very much.

The steady stream of patrons slowed and tapered off; Tabitha started work on Lady Sabine's gown, the farmer's wife's dress, the baker's wife's apron, and a few other projects that had been left for her throughout the day. She showed off her work to the cats and asked for their opinions. Tom might not be there, but a few of them

responded with appropriately critical eyes.

Still not enough color on the skirt. Lady Sabine wanted to stand out!

Tabitha pulled out another seam, ready to try again.

Owning the shop was a lovely dream, one Tabitha never even dared to wish for herself, and she might not quite know what to do with it, but she knew how to keep sewing dresses and hoping they would bring a bit of magic to their respective buyers.

At some point, Tabitha might have to hire another stitch-girl to keep up with the orders or take Tabitha's place at the till, but that should be more than enough adventure for her.

She liked the quiet.

She liked her peaceful routine.

She liked having one-sided conversations with her feline companions as they unraveled her thread, sat on her projects, or zoomed about at odd hours as all cats do. And even if she could fulfill another dream for herself, what more could a girl like her possibly wish for?

A boy showed up in the evening to earn a coin by helping her deliver the products she had already finished. Cleaning up after him, she went to put the deed to the dress shop with the rest of her important papers and the fancy calligraphy of the princess's last letter caught her eye.

She called the delivery boy back. "Billy, do you mind telling me what this says?"

A blush heated her cheeks. A boy who couldn't read, well, that really didn't matter,

did it? Not so long as his trade didn't require it. But a girl who couldn't and couldn't teach the same skill to her daughters, sharing with them the old matron stories that taught them their duty to the kingdoms and the fates?

Now that was a true shame.

Billy nodded with no sign of judgment. Bless him. "Isn't that the invitation to the princess's wedding, miss? The one she and her ogre-slayer are having on the castle grounds week after next? Me and my mum got one too."

Yes, Tabitha knew that. Or at least, she had reasoned that was what the letter must be after hearing the news from Lady Sabine. "And the bit on the end? The part that doesn't match?"

The boy squinted, staring at the narrowly scrawled bit of black ink fitted in around the more formal gold. Then his eyes went wide. "We didn't get that part. Do you think the princess wrote it herself? Do you get personal letters from the princess, miss? It says ' please come .'"

With those words, Tabitha thought of her old faerie dreams again.

And she really missed her Tom.

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Chapter 3

Chase Your Dreams

The last time Tabitha had seen Tom had been nearly three years ago. He had left on some adventure with his new miller friend, and she had spent hours pacing the floor, certain he would be returned to her broken and bleeding. The king's man from the night she tried to sell the matchsticks was not the only creature Tom had pounced on, playing the hero, and she had been sure that someday he would find an enemy he couldn't handle on his own.

Like an ogre masquerading as a marquis . . .

She shuddered at the thought. And when Tom's miller friend—Archie—returned from the neighboring marquis's castle without the cat in sight, she couldn't sit through the full tale without asking, “And what happened to Tom?”

Before the blond and broad-shouldered man could answer, a young woman moved beside him. She wore a common peasant dress—complete with an apron—but there was no mistaking who she was. The princess of Umbrae was a fierce beauty with long auburn curls who would stand out anywhere. “Tom? You called my brother Tom?”

Tabitha blushed. She had learned only the day before that Tom was actually an enchanted prince—the missing Crown Prince of Umbrae and Princess Ainsley's elder brother. And really, it only seemed natural that he should be royalty. The tabby cat had been far too intelligent and noble to be anything else—even if Tabitha still

wanted to think of him as her Tom.

But Tom was a prince, and his sister was sure to find Tabitha's lapse horribly disrespectful.

She bowed her head. "I'm so sorry, your highness. I meant, what happened to Prince Leopold?" Leopold. Leopold. His name was Prince Leopold.

"We don't know," Archie said, his frustration evident in the tenseness of his jaw and the way he kept his muscled arms tightly folded. Tabitha was tall enough to awkwardly dwarf a few men, but not Archie. Not by a long measure. Strange to see such a large man look so helpless. "The rat—the ogre—started moving again. Leo caught it in his jaws and ran off with it. We don't know where."

"But we're going to keep searching for him," Ainsley said, placing her hand on Archie's arm—full evidence of their recent adventures and corresponding whirl-wind romance on display. "And if you learn anything, or if he comes here again, you'll let us know?"

Tabitha bowed her head again, this time remembering to lengthen her skirt into a full and proper curtsy. "Yes, of course, your highness."

Ainsley paused, her brow furrowing. "Tabitha, you called my brother Tom. You stitched him up when no one knew who he was. You cared for him. You loved him."

Tabitha shook her head, ducking away. She had grown up having faerie dreams. She truly believed in the stories the revered matrons told of love and romance and had cheered on Tom's unlikely friendship with the miller's son and Archie's subsequent relationship with the princess, like watching one of those tales in the flesh. But she never thought she was a part of it.

Yes, she had stitched the miller's son's cloak to make him look more like a noble huntsman destined to become a celebrated ogre-slayer. Yes, she had helped Tom when he was hurt.

But that was all. "I don't mean any disrespect, your highness."

"But you called my brother Tom . . . Can't you call me Ainsley?"

Even as Tabitha shook her head, still trying desperately to cover for her previous lapse and show proper deference, her thoughts flew ahead of her and straight into the clouds. She and the princess were of the same age (though Tabitha passed the princess in height). The dress Ainsley wore now wouldn't look out of place on a simple shop-girl. In another world, in another life, maybe they could have been friends. A miller's son had just become an ogre-slayer. Perhaps many other impossible things could come true.

But that was just another fantasy; it would never work for a girl like her. Tabitha's eyes went to the black and silver guards who shadowed the princess everywhere. She waited for one to sneer at her simple patchwork-dress, to remind her who her mother was. Perhaps even try to have her arrested for panhandling or some other petty crime she had unwittingly committed as a child.

And even if none of them did right now, it was only a matter of time.

It had been so many years, and her memories were muddled. She couldn't say which of the king's men had been the one to attack her, but her mind quickly solved the problem by deciding every dark-haired man in the king's livery was the same.

And every authoritative woman was still her mother.

Tabitha might be able to serve and bow before a noblewoman, but this was something

entirely different. Ainsley wanted something Tabitha could never give.

She could never be friends with a princess.

She could only be friends with Tom because . . . well, he was Tom . And there didn't seem to be a thing she could do to make herself think of him differently.

“You'll work on it?” Ainsley asked, as though she already knew she had lost.

Tabitha nodded her head in deference, and she kept searching for Tom. Whether he was a prince or a cat, she missed her friend desperately. She hated to think he could be in trouble, but Tabitha never found anything worth reporting.

She only saw Tom in her dreams—the same sort of dream every few nights.

Or rather, the same series of dreams.

They could have been memories. Tabitha would be standing beside her mannequin, fitting a dress like she had done hundreds and hundreds of times before.

And she would ask, “What do you think of this one, Tom?”

Instead of an answering meow , a male's voice she never heard in the waking world would answer her. “Of course it's beautiful, kitten, but I very much doubt the countess's daughter should be wearing that much white. You know she has men calling on her at all hours.”

Or “Is that the size she gave you? There's no corset in the world that would make her waist that trim.”

Tabitha always laughed. It was so outrageous. It was so Tom. Somehow, he knew

about fashion and all the latest noble gossip, but perhaps he always had. His meows had always been very opinionated, and now that she knew he was a prince, her dreams had given him a proud and clever voice to match.

Her dream prince was someone much bolder than Tabitha could ever be.

She wasn't always sewing. Once or twice, she stood by the cupboard, wondering what she had left to feed the cats, and a cloaked huntsman would come into the room and set a poached rabbit on the table, like a cat gifting her one of his rats.

And Tom would look stern and say something like "You can give some of it to the cats if you want to, but you better be feeding yourself as well."

So much more than a mere shop assistant, Tom was the perfect partner and foil to all her dreams. She would see him sitting up in a chair to keep her darker dreams at bay or working on some creative project of his own. And even though she didn't always see him clearly, and she didn't think she had ever seen the prince's human form before (even when they were both still children growing up in vastly different parts of Castletown) she always knew it was him.

So many dreams, but they always ended the same way. Thoroughly charmed, she tried to get closer to her dreamlike version of Tom only for the shop to fade away. In the sudden way of dreams, she found herself standing in the nearby forest. The dark thorn trees parted; the river gurgled slightly in the background. Tom—human Tom—walked toward her, turning his head this way and that with a slight frown.

Perhaps he was lost. Perhaps he was searching for something . . . or someone?

Tabitha never saw for certain, but in the way of dreams, she knew she had to help him find his way home. "Leo? Prince Leopold?" She called for him using every name she knew.

She reached for his hand only to have it slip away.

But, after three years of having that same sort of dream, something whispered back to her with the breathy voice of the wind.

Tabitha, please come.

In the early morning hours, Tabitha woke in her familiar cot. Sweat stuck to her nightdress though nothing in the waking world seemed unsettled. She remembered everything that had happened the previous day. The shop was now hers, and the last message she had received from the castle was an invitation to Ainsley and Archie's wedding, scheduled in less than a fortnight—the same invitation for their open celebration that went out to every citizen of Castletown, except for a small note written in the princess's own hand that was meant for Tabitha alone.

Please come.

Tabitha shook her head, her mind and heart transferred back into the world of her dreams. The words were the same, and she knew she had recognized a few of the trees. It couldn't just be a coincidence. Something—or someone—was asking her to walk past the thorn trees into the faerie forest until she found her Tom. Her heart raced inside her chest at the thought of entering the Darkwood on her own, but she couldn't avoid her dreams forever.

Tabitha knew she could grant a few small wishes by making dresses in her shop; she could see to the needs of a small colony of wild and finicky cats who she loved, but she had never been so bold as to wish for anything for herself. She hadn't even wished to own the shop that Granny Tailor had given her, but finding Tom was the dream she wanted most.

For the kingdom. For the princess.

For Tom.

Tabitha, please come.

She quickly dressed in sensible boots, her favorite dress (the patchwork pattern now more artistic than strictly necessary) and the old tailor's bright blue scarf.

Then she grabbed one of her cats for courage, ready to follow her dreams.

Chapter 4

Manic Pixie Dream Boy

Most girls wished to become princesses, and most princesses wished to be queens. The Fae Queen's daughters wished for their mother's position so much, they divided the courts between them, vying for more and more power. What they didn't seem to understand was that being queen meant dealing with problem after problem and never getting a thing for one's self.

Even when the Queen accepted a human thrall as a gift from the power-grasping son of her youngest daughter, it wasn't for her own sake but for the benefit of all of Faerie.

All the signs and oracles said that she needed a human to bring new magic into the realm, welcoming the coming Spring, but humans were rare in her court. Taking humans through unapproved and reckless methods had led to the ruin of the Fae Courts more than once. To have a human prince given to her that met her every requirement seemed more than she could ever dream.

But humans were strange and fragile things. If she didn't want the mortal prince to expire before his time, then she had to watch him. Feed him. Make sure he slept and wasn't tormented too much by other fae and faerie creatures of the Darkwood.

The Queen became attached, more than she ever expected to. The human might be the only one not conspiring behind her back, if only because he wasn't clever enough to do so.

And all the while, her magic reached new heights, fueled by his simple stories and dreams.

So she protected him. She loved him. And she commanded his every movement when they were together. But sometimes her attention was called elsewhere.

That was when he walked and dreamed.

Tabitha started her quest by the river—the one that went by the mill and powered the water wheel. She had heard the trickling of water in her dream, so she followed the flowing stream—reflecting the oranges and pinks of sunrise—until she crossed the border into the Darkwood.

And then she went a few steps more.

Her boots sank into the damp earth. The familiar thorn trees carried the first few buds of spring, and a gentle breeze danced through the grove. Her fluffy gray cat, Bandit, stirred in her arms. She looked down to find a ring of white mushrooms. A twig broke. She glanced up at the sound, and then she saw him —standing in the ring.

In her dreams, she had always known that the man she saw was Tom.

This time, she wasn't so sure and had to mark off each of his features for some sign.

Under a thick cloak, he wore a rich tunic and leggings like an old-fashioned noble. He wasn't tall—or at least, not much taller than her. Wiry and thin. Perhaps a bit delicate?

Like a cat. Perhaps like the fae.

That's what she decided on first. "I've seen you in my dreams. Are you fae?"

He tilted his head. His shoulder-length hair was tied up in the back, besides a few stray pieces braided with beads. It was brown with a touch of red—a chestnut that fell somewhere between the princess’s bright auburn curls and Tom’s brown tabby coat.

His eyes were the same hazel.

But when he looked at her, there was an open innocence to his expression that didn’t seem right. “Do I look fae?” he asked, like he wasn’t sure himself.

She shook her head and gave a bit of a huff. “Not fair to answer my question with one of your own, but I suppose that is the way of fae.”

The man’s lips quirked with a wry smile. “Very true. They never answer any of my questions either. They just like for me to tell them stories.”

“Stories?”

He nodded. “About humans. I know a lot about humans,” he said with a certain measure of pride, like such knowledge was an accomplishment meant to be revered. “Though sometimes I tell them stories about a cat.”

This wasn’t making any sense. “They want stories about cats?” Tabitha glanced down at Bandit in her arms. When the cat was born, she had been determined to find names starting with B for the full litter after his mother Biscuit, but he truly was a lazy creature who seemed content to be carried around like a ragdoll.

“It was a special sort of cat,” the man said. “At least he was different from the kind of cats you’ll find in the Fae Realm. He couldn’t talk or wear boots or do any normal thing a faerie beast might do, but he still found ways to be clever.”

Now that sounded familiar. A bit backward and sideways, perhaps, but familiar. “Oh?

Did he help a miller's son become a marquis and slay an ogre?"

He blinked. "You already know the story?"

"Everything but the end. After he slayed the ogre, what did he do? Run off and leave everyone behind?"

The man furrowed his brow as if he really had to search for the answer. A moment passed before he spoke again. "He didn't want to. He made a deal with a fae prince, binding them together, but he had a plan—a clever plan. A way to get back. I just don't remember what it was." He shook his head. He looked so lost. Tom was always so confident—even as a cat. "I suppose I never really was all that good at telling stories."

"Do you remember his name?" she tried.

The man smirked. That seemed more like her Tom. "He was a cat. He had many names. Lots of people would just call him Puss."

"And what is your name?"

"Tam'lin," he said at once.

Tabitha shook her head. "That is a fae name. You're not fae," she said, something inside her now certain. She reached for his face, looking into his familiar hazel eyes. "Tom."

He flinched from her at first, but only for a moment. Then he answered, "Tabitha?"

Her heart soared. He did remember her, but before her reaching fingers could make contact with his skin, he jerked back from her. She couldn't give up. She had to bring

him home. But the world seemed to spin. She grabbed for something—anything steady to hold onto in her panic.

Her knees hit the earth, chilled mud soaking through her skirts.

She had fallen through the ring of mushrooms.

And now . . . everything had changed. The greens seemed brighter. The shadows seemed deeper. The whole forest had shifted, becoming a warped reflection of what it used to be, and Tom was gone—there one minute and gone the next. Perhaps he was just another dream?

But the hand she had used to grasp out wildly when the world had started to spin now held a small colored hair bead.

Tom.

Chapter 5

In Your Dreams

Tabitha Brewer often had dreams about a mystical faerie land where everything was much brighter than the world she currently knew, and now she was seeing it in the flesh. Trees that were a more vibrant shade of green. Birdsongs that seemed to build in perfect harmony.

But where was Tom?

“Leo? Prince Leopold?” She put the hair bead into her apron pocket and started walking, searching for any sign of the errant prince. But the shadows lengthened, and the forest grew dark without success. The birdsongs were joined by other stray sounds. Whispered voices. Laughter. Her heart beat faster in her chest, and she gripped her gray cat more tightly.

She couldn’t stay out here much longer.

But she had been so focused on searching for Tom that the trees around her had lost any semblance of familiarity. How could she find her way back home?

Bandit shifted in her arms, and she was reminded again of the cold winter night when she had gone to the Tailor’s shop. Even if she couldn’t make it home tonight, would it be possible for her to seek the aid of a stranger? Any sort of forest cottage with a few extra table scraps and a fire should do. That’s what she needed, an older matron offering some food and warmth. As the thought became more prominent in her mind,

Tabitha passed another curtain of branches and stopped short.

There, in the next clearing, was a merry-looking cottage. Smoke rolled from the chimney, perfuming the air with the smell of sweet meat. Food. Warmth. Had she dreamed it there?

Could she even afford to question it?

She didn't even make it all the way to the front porch before the door opened.

An elderly woman smiled at her, showing the gaps along her gums. As she looked Tabitha and the cat up and down, her eyes widened into orbs, like an eager owl. "Hello, dearie. What are you doing out here in the cold?"

Tabitha steeled herself. This was what she needed. What she had dreamed of. "I'm lost. Could you direct me back to Castletown, please?"

The woman cocked her head. "Castletown? A human village?"

"Do you not know it?" Her heart sank. "I must have traveled farther than I realized."

"Well, there is no need to fret." The woman opened the door wider, beckoning Tabitha inside. "You can stay here tonight. I was so hoping to have a guest for supper. One might even say that I dreamed you here." She winked, as if sharing a private joke.

"You dreamed me here?" Tabitha shook her head. "But I had that dream too." Or at least, she had carried that hope once she had become lost. She had wanted this to happen.

The woman only became more eager. In fact, she might have started to drool as she

guided Tabitha to enter the room behind her. “Another dreamer, are you? And fresh from the human village? Then you must come in at once. You know there must be magic when a pair of dreamers meet, and who are we to question the will of the fates?”

Dreamers. Fates. The words sounded right. Something out of a matron’s tale. And there was something about this place—more than the thin connection it shared with Granny Tailor and their shop in Castletown. Mingling with the kitchen smoke, cinnamon scented the air and led Tabitha to find a table with a plate piled high with bars of pastries the same shade of brown as the cottage walls and trimmed with white icing.

There was something eerily familiar about it. “Is this gingerbread?”

The woman’s smile widened as she herded Tabitha toward a chair and turned to lock the front door with a brass key. Was it troubling that it locked with a key instead of a latch or board that could be easily opened from the inside, like she was trying to keep them both in rather than keeping the rest of the world out ?

The shutters on the windows seemed to be locked in the same way as well.

“Yes, of course,” the woman said, sunnily. She was too eager. She put her key into her apron pocket and waved her arms about as if to make herself the most interesting thing in the room. A distraction? An obvious distraction, but a distraction from what? “Sit down and have some of my special sweets, dearie. I’ll tend the fire, and we will have the most marvelous feast. Something worth dreaming of. Something worth dying for.” There was that wink again, the words that seemed more a joke for the eccentric woman’s own private amusement, but Tabitha couldn’t catch her true meaning this time.

The old woman had already gone through an open doorway that must have led to the

kitchen, her movements accompanied by the banging of pots and pans.

Tabitha stood by the offered chair but didn't sit, holding Bandit closer. She had wanted this. She had wished for this. A pair of dreamers . . . It had sounded so right. Perhaps it was a sort of magic that might be blessed by the benevolent fates who served the Light-Bringer. But even without the extra locks, the room was unsettling . Odds and ends were piled about like the old dress shop, but Tabitha focused on wire cages large enough to kennel dogs and tanning tools that cast twisted shadows.

Bundles of herbs and crows' feet hung from the ceiling.

The only inviting thing about the room was the plate of gingerbread, but when Tabitha looked at it again, picking up a small piece to smell and test in her fingers, a female voice sounded behind her.

"You're not really going to eat that, are you?"

Tabitha started, dropping the gingerbread and glancing about the room. "Who said that?"

"Me, of course," the same voice answered, causing Tabitha to look farther down at one of the wire cages. Inside was a white and silver-tipped cat. Speaking. Even raising her eyes to the heavens with haughty exasperation. "Don't act like you have never seen a cat before; you are holding one in your arms." Her sapphire eyes went to Bandit like she expected he might be the true brains of the party. "Tell me handsome, is she always so dense?"

Bandit remained silent, and since Tabitha was still struggling with the idea of a talking cat, she remained silent too.

"The strong, silent type, I see. I can handle that," the caged cat concluded before

turning her attention back to Tabitha. “What about you, cat-holder? Are you ready to speak to me yet?”

Tabitha took a step back, bumping the table and shaking a few pieces of gingerbread to the floor. Would the old woman hear them and come running? Did Tabitha want her to? Someone had to explain this all to her. “He can’t . . . You can’t . . .”

“Oh dear. You really did just come from a human village, didn’t you?” The cat said the words with an aloof condescension that it seemed all cats should have. Perhaps it was the only natural thing in this whole place. “Well, I don’t have time to explain everything to you, but you should know something of the old tales. Perhaps one about wily, old crones who live in the woods and seem a bit too eager to offer sugary sweets to unfortunate travelers?”

Tabitha frowned, trying to put the pieces together. She did remember a matron story about a witch who lived in a house made out of gingerbread. It seemed they might have exaggerated a few of the details, but that wasn’t the troubling part. “She eats children.”

The cat gave a slight nod. “If she can get them. If not, I suppose she thought a couple of cats might do. And a skinny cat-carrier.”

Tabitha shook her head. The walls might be the same color of gingerbread, but they seemed far too thick—like they were keeping out all the air along with keeping her trapped inside.

This couldn’t be real. “Is there no way to stop her?”

“Of course there is a way,” the cat answered, exasperated. “She’s half-deaf and half-blind and standing by an open oven. What do you think you should do?”

Tabitha shuddered. Shoving the witch into her own oven was part of the story . . .
“But I couldn’t just kill her.”

“Why not? She wants to kill us. And if you kill her, you’ll be able to get her key and get us all out of this place.”

When Tabitha came to live with Granny Tailor, there had been so many people ready to pity the young girl and call her mother horrible, but Tabitha had still mourned the woman when she died. Tabitha mourned the beautiful and vivacious woman she knew from before the plague, the one who had all the men fighting over her when she served at the bar and lived so freely.

The one Tabitha had loved and had surely loved her too.

She had never known what to do with that tangle of mixed emotions, and a part of her still wondered what really would have happened if she had gone home that night? When the plague ravaged the village, her mother yelled, cursed, and threatened, but that was as far as it ever went. Her mother might have been cross when Tabitha returned home without coin or the goods she had gone to sell, but perhaps not as badly as her younger self had feared?

And perhaps, somehow, they might have survived the rest of the plague together and returned to sharing the brighter moments they had before.

Or at least, a part of her had always thought she would return home once the plague had ended.

Instead, her mother had died in the snow, and Tabitha sometimes wondered if she should be blamed. How could she leave her mother alone with no one to love and care for her?

No. Tabitha couldn't be responsible for another death. She couldn't be expected to kill an old woman, no matter what her crime. This was far too much. "There has to be another way."

The cat blinked, still staring up at Tabitha steadily from her cage. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Can't we just leave? Maybe she has another key somewhere?" Tabitha looked about the room, only to find another brass key sitting by the plate of gingerbread, a bit too conveniently. She shifted Bandit in her arms so she could pick it up. "That wasn't there before."

The faerie cat's sapphire eyes narrowed. "You are a dreamer then? Truly? That will make things far more interesting. But don't just stand there. We need to use that key to escape. My cage first, if you please."

Another metallic bang came from the kitchen. "I'll be out in another moment, dearie," the witch said with too much cheer. Were the ominous sounds from the kitchen coming closer?

Or was it only the frantic beating of her heart?

Tabitha forced herself to move, sticking the key in the padlock.

"Faster," the cat said. "Unless you intend to conjure us something else to fight that witch directly."

Tabitha shook her head in a whole body way. Her hand trembled too much around the key. She couldn't do this. "I can't conjure anything."

"Well, not with an attitude like that. Just look, the key is already fading."

It did feel a bit less solid in her hand. She could almost see through the brass. But how could solid brass become see-through? It had to be some sort of magic.

Weak magic. Useless magic.

Her magic. “I made it appear.”

The cat nodded. “And you will make it disappear if you don’t focus. Now, what do you want this key to do? What do you believe it can do?”

She wanted it to help them escape. To take her and both the cats far away from this place. And she wanted it now, already picturing the old woman returning with a raised kitchen cleaver.

Leave. Now. She might not be able to kill an old woman, but she needed to save the cats.

She couldn’t stand it if something happened to either of them.

A sudden light filled the room, brighter than the sun.

And just like that, everything around Tabitha changed.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:04 am

Chapter 6

Dream in Color

A rush of nausea and light-headedness sent Tabitha spinning to the ground. When she opened her eyes, she was still holding the key and balancing Bandit in her arms, but she wasn't in the old witch's cottage anymore. She was crouched on the forest floor.

Tabitha dropped the key. She almost dropped the cat. She had wanted to use the key, not only to open the cage but to escape the entire cottage.

Somehow the magic of this place had granted her wish.

It was all so surreal. Especially the white and silver-tipped cat who was sitting in front of her, carelessly grooming a single paw. "Well, that was a bit much, but I suppose it will do. Though, it is a shame you left the witch alive. You know she is just going to find someone else to feed on. Perhaps a child."

Tabitha shuddered at the thought. She still felt completely rung out. Like she needed to dry-heave into one of the bushes that still seemed far too uncanny and bright. "Are all fae so horrible?"

"Fae?" The cat blinked and put down her paw. "Witches aren't fae. Do you imagine a fae would ever let herself age so disgracefully? That woman was perfectly human—perhaps another dreamer like you. Twisted by her own magic and hungry for more. They are far worse than any fae or faerie creature you can name."

“I didn’t want to kill her.” She couldn’t be responsible for another death. She just couldn’t. But if the woman truly had killed and even eaten children . . . “But perhaps . . . she was old. Might she die in her sleep? Something painless?”

The cat flicked her tail lazily in response. “From your lips to the Fae Queen’s pointed ears, though I would be careful about throwing curses around. Someday, you might truly mean them.”

Curses? “I’m a dreamer. Both you and that old witch said so . . . so I have magic in the Fae Realm?” She still didn’t quite believe the words, but everything she wanted, everything she wished for, was coming true, and she had never realized how awful a power that could be.

Was it any wonder that the old woman had been twisted by it, becoming such a wretched and unfeeling crone? Would that be Tabitha’s fate as well? She certainly hoped not.

She shook her head. “I didn’t think my own dreams would be so dark.”

“Didn’t you?”

“Not all my dreams are dark,” Tabitha said defensively. This wasn’t her fault, and she didn’t want to stay here. She just needed to find Tom and return home. “Some of them . . . I came here looking for someone I saw in a dream. Another human like me. Have you seen—?”

The faerie cat didn’t even blink. “A lost human prince? Handsome? About your own age?”

That was Tom! “You have seen him.”

The faerie cat let out a puff of air like a laugh. “No, I just know what human girls dream about. What we all dream about. Though currently . . .” She rose as if about to stand on her two hind feet but then sat down again, self-consciously. “I’m sorry, but this is so undignified. If you want more answers from me, perhaps you could make me something decent to wear.”

Tabitha frowned. “You want something to wear?”

“Yes,” the faerie cat said. She started grooming herself again, like she could lengthen her fur to cover herself more completely. “You are familiar with the concept of clothing? And why a gentlelady might wish for a proper dress while in . . . certain company.” Her sapphire eyes marked the other cat still resting in Tabitha’s arms.

The male cat. Was that what was making her so uncomfortable?

It should have been comical. It should have been absurd.

“Aren’t you always naked?” She was a cat.

The faerie cat lifted her nose into the air. “You assume me one of your wild vagabonds? How vulgar. I am a creature of magic and the first of all the cats. I was wearing a proper frock when my travels brought me to the witch. She was the one who stripped me naked, and you were the one who removed us from the house without a chance to retrieve my gown.”

Tabitha considered the problem. It might be different than what she was used to, but it was a welcome reprieve from thinking about the witch or anything else in this world that still seemed much too big for her. “I suppose I could make you a dress. If I had the proper materials.”

She started to tear off a piece of her underskirt, trying to picture how she would go

about fashioning a dress for a cat. She would start with a small bodice like a human might wear but perhaps a tapered skirt only in back so the cat could run on all-fours or stand as she pleased? It wouldn't cover the part under the cat's tail, but Tabitha still couldn't get herself to believe a cat needed to worry about that. She was a cat .

A talking, standing magical cat.

And as the idea took root, the material in Tabitha's hand shifted into the proper design. The white cotton became silk dyed to match the cat's sapphire eyes.

The bodice and the tapered skirt matched the image in her mind.

More magic. Tabitha stood there dumbly for a moment, waiting for the accompanying nausea and light-headedness to pass.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" The cat was impatient and perhaps tired of trying to hide behind her own tail. "The dress. Aren't you going to hand it over?"

Tabitha started to, almost glad to have someone else's orders to follow with how strange everything was becoming, but then she thought better of it. The cat could talk. She could stand on her hind legs and wanted to wear a dress. She had to be some sort of faerie beast, and Tabitha needed her help. This new world was too much for her to handle on her own. The old witch had proven that. But the stories of the fae (and the faerie creatures who accompanied them) always said they were self-serving and prone to tricks.

Tabitha couldn't risk that the cat might abandon her once she got what she wanted. She had to make some sort of deal. "And if I give you the dress, what will you give me in return?"

The cat yowled. "What do you think I could offer you, girl?"

A question answered by another question. The cat truly was a faerie creature, but Tabitha needed information more than anything else. “Will you answer my questions? Really answer them, with no more riddles or questions of your own?”

The cat paused to consider. “How many questions? I don’t mind making a bargain with you, but you must be specific.”

Tabitha nodded. She wanted to be firm, but a part of her was still trembling. She couldn’t stay in this world long. If nothing else, she wouldn’t risk making herself into another cannibalistic crone. But she had come here for a reason, and she had to see that through as well as she was able.

“I’ll give you the dress if you help me find Tom. You will answer all my questions and be my guide until we find him.”

The cat was as stone-faced as a cat could be. “And if we don’t?”

“Then I will release you from your bargain.” She couldn’t be unfair. “But only if you tried your very best.”

The faerie forest seemed to still as the cat considered the bargain. “Hmm . . . I don’t believe that is a very good bargain, but you helped me escape that witch, and you still have an innocent air about you. Magic hasn’t twisted you up yet. Give me the dress, and it will be as you say.”

Tabitha put the dress by the cat, and because it somehow seemed appropriate, she turned so neither she nor Bandit would see what happened next. She waited until the cat spoke again.

“Much better.” The cat shifted onto her hind-legs, swishing the skirt and showing off her new frock. “Now, what can you tell me about your missing prince?”

“He isn’t really mine, but he . . .” Tabitha shook her head. It seemed she had come full circle. She was talking to a magical faerie beast, a cat just like Tom had once seemed to be. That had to mean something, didn’t it? “Tom used to be a cat, but he’s a prince. A human prince who made some sort of a deal with a fae prince.”

“Is that all you have to go on?”

“Yes. No, wait.” She put down Bandit and felt around her apron pockets. Then she held out the colored hair bead. “This was his. Does that help?”

The cat gave it a quick sniff. “That’s easy. He’s a thrall. A royal one too. You said he made a deal with a fae prince? There are many of those, but I would say you are looking for someone at the Queen’s court. Maybe even the Queen herself.”

Tabitha looked back at the bead doubtfully. “You can tell that from one bead?”

The cat flicked her tail like she was insulted. “Well, it’s not entirely unexpected. Humans in the Fae Realm . . . If they aren’t proper dreamers and don’t have enough sense to control their own magic, then they often end up as thralls to powerful fae. You could end up the same way. I imagine you have some pretty dreams that any one of them would be happy to feast on.”

The fae feasted on dreams? Like the witch feasted on children? At least, it sounded just as sinister. “Is that why Tom looked so . . . His eyes were so . . .”

“Blank?” the faerie cat guessed. “I would imagine so. Though if he had been entirely used up, he would have been discarded. I’ve seen them before. Fallen like broken puppets, lying wherever they were dropped, or dull-eyed men who walk without any direction in mind. Still alive, perhaps, but without the sense to keep themselves that way. And their masters . . . They have no more use for them.”

That was far worse than anything Tabitha could have dreamed of. If Tom was doomed to become some sort of soulless puppet, then Tabitha couldn't wait. She picked up Bandit again. "I have to get to him before that happens."

"Good luck. If he's still a favored pet of a royal fae, that is hardly an easy task."

"But you'll help me, won't you? That was the deal."

The cat shook her head. "I said I would answer your questions and guide you. If you end up fighting the sparking Fae Queen for possession of this boy, then you are on your own."

"That's fair," Tabitha agreed. She couldn't imagine fighting a fae queen herself and could never ask someone else to do it for her, even if it would save Tom. She put the hair bead back in her pocket, preparing herself for the journey. "Where do we go to find the Fae Queen?"

"Why are you asking me? You are the one who wishes to find her. And you can hardly expect her palace to be open to just anyone."

"But my magic . . . my dreams could help us get there?"

"Yes," the faerie cat said, sounding exasperated. "Tell me, girl. What do you suppose a palace of a fae queen and all her court might look like? Where would it be?"

Tabitha frowned, but she took a step forward. There was a lot she could imagine about that.

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Chapter 7

Castle in the Air

T am'lin? Where are you?

Leo twitched and turned around. The name echoing inside his head wasn't his own, but he knew he should answer it anyway. He had been deep in the mist of the Darkwood, but hearing that name was an anchor, drawing him in no matter how far adrift he wandered.

Sometimes, it seemed a welcome thing. A refuge in the chaotic and magical storm.

But after seeing the young woman named Tabitha, the name inside his head felt more like a chain keeping him bound.

Tam'lin, come to me.

Leo heard the name again along with the command; he knew the one who called him, but still he hesitated.

In the Fae Realm, Leo was often asked to tell stories of the human world, but every time he did, the less of his memories he seemed to keep for himself. It was as if the tales he told were truly being transferred from his lips into the minds and hearts of those who heard it. But he remembered Tabitha. He dreamed of her most every night. He couldn't get her out of his head, and when she had spoken to him, when she tried to touch him, she almost seemed . . . real .

She hadn't called him Tam'lin, Leo, or even Crown Prince Leopold.

She had called him Tom, connecting him to a life he could hardly remember. The old emotions drained away. The details lost. All he had left were a few scattered stories he repeated long after the magic of the tales had run out.

That was why he was late to answer the call of his mistress, waiting until he couldn't wait anymore.

Leopold Tamias Lynister.

That time, the Fae Queen used his full name as a formal summoning, pulling him from the forest and back into her private rooms in her White Palace. Such summonings were a magic common to this place. Fae didn't seem to mind moving instantly through the air with nothing but their true name to cling to. But Leo wasn't fae. His body naturally resisted the process, and something inside him seemed especially resistant today.

So it hurt. A lot.

He appeared before his queen and collapsed onto the floor. His feet wouldn't hold him.

The Queen stood from her dressing table—or at least, what appeared to be a blur of light and sound where her dressing table ought to be—and came over to him. “Tam'lin? Are you all right?”

Tam'lin might not be his proper name, just as his dream girl had said, but Leo certainly preferred it. At least when someone in the Fae Realm called him Tam'lin, Leo could choose when and how to respond. And right now, the best response seemed to be to not say anything at all.

If he had, he might have said something sarcastic—a reflex as it had once been in his nature.

Now, Leo had learned it was better to be silent rather than say something his queen wouldn't understand and might take offense to.

He had forgotten a lot about the human world, but emerald eyes often flashed in his head, and he knew he had to be kind and eager to please the Fae Queen. He had to make her love him.

Even when it hurt.

She shook her head at him. A light scolding. An indulgent sigh. She was annoyed, but she still loved him. “You know I don't like doing that, but I was worried. You usually answer right away, and the forest hasn't been stable lately. Why didn't you come when I first called you?”

Leo believed she had been worried. She never would have hurt him like that if she hadn't been. She loved him. So why had he tried to stay away? “I . . . I don't know.” Not a lie. After all the pain he just went through, he wasn't sure what about his conversation with his dream girl had captured him so completely. Only that he should be sorry for it.

He was sorry for it.

He pulled himself to his feet, but he kept his head bowed. “Forgive me, my queen.”

The Queen turned her head dismissively. She was used to him being forgetful and in need of her direction. “Just don't wander off again. We'll have many guests tonight, and I'll need your help to get ready.”

“Guests?” He must have forgotten something, and the room was still slowly coming into focus along with the Fae Queen.

She was a fair-haired and ageless beauty, wearing a delicate gossamer gown. Her ears were slightly pointed, and her words were precise. “For Spring’s Celebration. I told you.”

Leo nodded. If there was a celebration for the coming spring tonight, then it only made sense for lots of magical and exotic guests to come to the Queen’s palace.

But, if he had been given a choice, there was still only one person Leo wished to see.

Tabitha imagined a Fae Queen would live in a white palace crafted seamlessly from polished stone. She imagined the extravagant gardens, spiraled towers, and uniformed creatures ranging in size and shape—humanoid, animal, or even living plants. And, of course, she imagined the clothing—all the loose tunics and flowing skirts with their masterful designs that somehow still felt effortless, along with the enchanted fabrics of real flower petals or freshly spun gold.

But she still hadn’t quite prepared herself for the crowd of bodies coming in and out of the open gates. “What is going on?” Tabitha asked the faerie cat, trying to focus on her and the cat in her arms as her anxiety spiked.

The faerie cat walked lazily ahead—still on all fours. She seemed to only stand on occasion, like when she wanted to do something with her front paws or make a point. “Well, we are at the palace of the Fae Queen, just as you wished. And it looks like they are preparing for some sort of party. Fae celebrate the change of the seasons, just like the humans do. And it’s a good thing too.”

“Why is it good?” Warily, Tabitha dodged a pig-faced man bringing in carts of wine barrels. A goblin?

“Because most of the creatures here will soon be drunk, and we won’t be as noticed. We can blend in with the Queen’s invited guests. Or at least I can. You . . . ” Her sapphire eyes narrowed in on Tabitha’s patchwork dress. “Tell me, if you can make gowns like mine even in the human world, why are you wearing such a ratty dress yourself?”

Tabitha ducked her head as her cheeks warmed. But she was still barely more than a street urchin. She had no reason to put on airs. “It wouldn’t be fitting for me to dress above my station.”

The faerie cat seemed to accept that easily, comfortable in the idea that everyone else was beneath her in station. “I suppose so. But if that is still the ‘station’ you wish to carry, even in the Fae Realm, then you’d be better off letting me handle this.”

The faerie cat went up to a small faerie man who seemed to be in charge of the main door, consulting a scroll longer than his four-foot frame.

“I’d like to be shown to some refreshments, if you please,” she said, sounding bored and put upon. “I’ve only just arrived.”

The faerie man sneered without even bothering to look at his list. He wore a suit coat that somehow had the same texture as tree bark and matched the rich brown of his hair. Brownie? “Do you expect me to believe that you have been invited? The spirit of such a lowly and unpleasant beast?”

The cat flicked her tail with the same care that a human might shrug their shoulders. “No, not me personally, but I often attach myself to more powerful fae, and surely you have seen that not all of those that the Queen invited have been able to make the trip. I have come here on another’s behalf.”

The man’s beady eyes narrowed. “Who?”

“Someone who hails from the Borderlands and wishes to present this human to the queen, along with her regrets.” Finally, both sets of eyes rested on Tabitha, and she found herself taking a step back from their scrutiny, though neither the faerie man nor the cat reached past her chest.

The brownie finally looked at his list. “From the Borderlands? Inside the Mortal Realm? You speak of the Summer Princess?”

“Well, not many fae live in the Mortal Realm. Is there anyone else I could be speaking of?”

The brownie scowled. “That is not an answer, but if you truly came here only to present a rare gift to our Queen, then I can’t see the harm in it.”

The cat nodded. “The only harm would be if you turn us away and the Queen learns of it. She will want to meet this human. I can assure you of that.”

“Perhaps. But she’s still a bit wild, isn’t she?” The brownie looked at Tabitha as if he were afraid the human girl was a dog that might bite or soil the carpet. “I will summon one of the other thralls to stay with her until the Queen has time to inspect her. Then you may go and mingle with the other beasts.” He nodded them both through the door to a grand hallway, past another disordered clump of waiting guests, and the cat seemed rather pleased with herself.

“So, the Summer Princess is in the Mortal Realm? That is interesting. Seems I have spent far too much time away from court. I am dreadfully behind on all the latest gossip.” She scanned the room as if looking for one of the other well-dressed fae and faerie creatures to quench her curiosity.

But the chaos of the palace was quickly becoming too much for Tabitha. She was still staring back at the brownie doorman, puzzling over the conversation she had just

witnessed. “You lied to him?” She did not think fae or faerie creatures were supposed to do that.

The cat scowled. “Of course I did not. Every word I said was true.”

Tabitha frowned, going over all the words again. “You didn’t lie, but you led him to believe a lie.”

The cat’s eyes were back on the crowd of guests with only mild interest. “Of course I did, and you should be thanking me. I do believe that our bargain has been fulfilled.”

Tabitha’s heart lurched. She didn’t want to be abandoned in this crowd. “You said you would stay and answer my questions until I found . . .” She stopped.

There, effortlessly striding through the swarm of unfamiliar fae, was a man she had only seen in her dreams.

Tom.

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Chapter 8

Dream Prince

Though Tabitha was watching him with wide eyes, Tom nodded to her without a hint of recognition in his hazel ones. “Brindle said you are a new human from the Summer Princess? I am Tam’lin. Will you come with me? I can show you to a room where you can prepare yourself for when the Queen has time to see you.”

Tabitha fumbled. “But . . . you? I?”

“Mer-row.” Her cat escaped her unstable grasp while she grappled with words, coming to sit next to the silver-tipped faerie cat.

The faerie cat was smug. “Don’t mind us. Go and talk to your prince.”

Tom was still standing there with a blank expression on his face, so Tabitha ducked her head and hissed her objections to the cats. “He wants to take me to see the Queen.”

She did not want to see the Queen!

The faerie cat rolled her eyes. “Well, convince him not to and take him back with you to the Mortal Realm instead,” she said, like nothing could be simpler. “This is why you came, is it not? You really should have worn a better dress.”

“Miss?” Tom tried again, nodding his head like a butler. “Our rooms are just this

way, if you would follow me.”

Tabitha looked back at the cats one more time before walking toward him. She could do this. She came here to do this. She had just assumed that if she met Tom again, he would recognize her. “You work for the Fae Queen?”

He laughed, losing a little stiffness in his shoulders. “It’s the Fae Realm. We all work for the Fae Queen. But you don’t have to be afraid. She is a kind mistress and will treat you well.”

Tabitha frowned as she took another step. “But don’t you . . . Don’t you recognize me?”

“Perhaps,” he said almost at once. “You do look familiar.” He took another long look at her before continuing forward. “I did not expect to see you here, but I think. . . You’ve been in my dreams before?” He said it as if that should be as natural as passing someone on the street.

Well, that was something. “You remember that? And what was I doing there?”

He shrugged. “Sewing. Singing. Talking to cats.”

Truly? “Then you must have thought me very strange.”

“Yes.” He smiled with something like triumph. “That’s why I liked you. You were strange, and so was I.”

He . . . liked her? And he had said it so casually, like it shouldn’t be any question. Tabitha simply wasn’t used to such admissions. She wanted to believe all her cats liked her to some degree, but it was different coming directly from her dream prince. “You were a cat,” she said, trying to steady herself and help him fill out whatever

memories he still had left. “I called you Tom.”

“Tom?” Again, unnatural confusion rippled across his face. “That sounds familiar. I just . . .”

“You don’t remember.” That seemed to be the unfortunate pattern. “What do you remember then? How did you come to be here?”

He shrugged again, still taking slow steps across the great hall to wherever he wanted to take her. “I’m a thrall. A fae prince brought me here. And my queen and her subjects only take humans who are strays.”

“Stray?” What in all the kingdoms was a stray?

“You know. Lost. Unwanted. Likely to hurt themselves if they are left uncared for.”

Tabitha was torn between insisting that a human could not be “stray,” that such a word could only be applied to wayward house pets, and wondering if such a word could have once been applied to her. When she was on the street, dreaming of a faerie realm. When she left home and no one bothered to look for her. But such a fate could never be applied to Tom.

“You’re not a stray. You’re the Crown Prince of Umbrae.”

Tom barely blinked. “Yes, that sounds right. But I was still stray. My uncle wanted to kill me for my crown. Humans do that sort of thing all the time, and he might have succeeded if I weren’t taken in by the fae. And now, the humans have another prince they wish to raise in my place.” He ended with another shrug, everything about the recitation eerily calm.

“But what about your family? Your friends?”

“Much of my family has passed in a plague, and my title made it difficult for me to have many close friends, let alone a true love. I’m stray.”

“But none of that is true. I mean, it is true, but there is more to it than that.” It seemed much like the story the faerie cat told the doorman. No lies, but only the carefully curated truths the speaker wished to share. There were so many missing pieces that Tabitha didn’t know what bit to attack first. “Your uncle did want to kill you. He became a shapeshifting ogre and cursed the whole kingdom with magic he got from the fae to start the plague, but he didn’t succeed. You and the miller’s son killed him while you were a cat. And then, after you disappeared, Archie was made the Marquis of Carabus and might become our next prince after he marries the princess—your sister Ainsley—but Archie is your friend. He cares for you, and he wants you to come home. Everyone does.”

Tom had stopped walking, standing at the foot of a staircase to look back at her curiously. “Everyone?” He shook his head. “I can’t imagine my return would matter to everyone even if I am a prince, but perhaps . . . Do you mean to say that you would care if I returned? Is that why you have come?”

“Yes,” Tabitha said quickly, before she could overthink the situation. “I came because I care for you as well.”

Tom grinned. “I knew it. In my dreams, sometimes I was a cat, and sometimes I was a man, but you were always my Tabitha.”

His?

Her heart rose but fell again when he shook his head. “But even if what you said was true, I can’t just leave with you. The Queen or someone else would just call me back. Unless it was proven publicly that whatever deal they made was invalid.”

“And you had a plan to do that,” Tabitha pressed. “You said you did.”

Tom frowned again. “Maybe I did.”

“You just need to remember what it was. . . Perhaps you could wish to remember.”

“It isn’t so easy.”

“Why not? Humans have power in the Fae Realm.” She had done several magical things already, all without meaning to. Surely a prince could do much better than her.

Tom gave her a wry smile. “Dreamers do. I’m not much of a dreamer. I’m more of a cynic.”

That was ridiculous. Tom was always brilliant, even as a cat. There should be nothing she could do that he couldn’t. “There is no reason why you can’t be both. Dreams are often strengthened and improved by proper criticism. Cynics can help the best dreams come true.”

Tom laughed. “Look at you. I tell you I’m a cynic, and you find a way to make it sound magical. That’s what I always loved about you, Tabs. You could always make something better than it was. Even me.”

Loved? And was she just imagining the connection, that he seemed to remember more and speak more freely when he spoke of their relationship?

The matrons often said that true love could break any faerie curse.

Tabitha felt her cheeks warm. That was too much. She had never had someone compliment her so freely before, so personally, but perhaps that was only because he was so altered? She needed to focus, and Tom was certain to improve if she could

just keep reminding him who he was.

“I don’t need to make you sound better than you are. You are already a prince of Umbrae and a hero of Castletown.” He was a hero to Tabitha too, but she wasn’t quite ready to share that out loud. “And if I can help you . . . give you some of my magic or dreams or whatever you need to remember some of what you have lost . . .”

Tom peered at her more earnestly. “And how would you do that?”

Tabitha hesitated, but it was truly the only idea she had. And they didn’t have much time. She looked back at the crowd of fae and faerie creatures. They were mostly clustered in the center of the great hall, facing the adjoining ballroom, but they could look over at any moment.

She took Tom’s unresisting hand and led him behind the stairs. “I have an idea. If this is the Fae Realm and the magic works like the old matron stories, then maybe we could . . . We tried before, when you were a cat, but now that you’re human . . . If you want to . . .”

Tom smirked, catching on quicker than he had before, already seeming a lot more like his former self. “Well, that is certainly worth thinking about.”

Tabitha took a step back. Somehow this had been easier when he was a cat. “If you don’t want to—”

Tom took a firmer grip on her hand. “No, there’s no backing out now. You had an idea—a marvelous and inspired idea—and now I am quite determined to see the result. Aren’t you?”

Tabitha didn’t know what to say. This was happening so much faster than she had ever dreamed. But Tom had her hand, and then he moved to cup her face.

And before she knew it, Tabitha was kissing the lost prince of Umbrae.

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Chapter 9

Once Upon a Dream

The kiss was sudden but sweet. Short but lingering. And even when it was over, it seemed that she was still overcome by its spell. But they had to stay focused on their objective.

What was their objective? “Did . . . did it help?”

Tom held his cat-like smirk, but his hazel eyes seemed more focused. Eager. He shook his head with mocking disapproval. “Well, I have to say, I’m a little disappointed. I mean, it was nice—inspired, even—but I can definitely see some room for improvement.” He pulled her hand to his waist. “Your hand should be there. Mine should be here,” his hand moved to the small of her back, “and it should go on longer and a bit more like this.”

He kissed her again. Deeper. Longer. Something out of a literal dream. But he still hadn’t answered her question. She pushed him away like the naughty and incorrigible beast he was under his princely facade. “Tom, did it work?”

“Tabitha, I love you,” he said with a sudden certainty and confidence that seemed so unmistakably Tom. “I know I was only a cat to you, and it might take you a bit longer to feel the same way, but I tried to visit other dreams when I first came to this place—my sister, my father, even that useless miller boy—and you were the only one who seemed to see me. You were the one I wanted to come home to. What else do I need to know?”

Tabitha couldn't answer him. Music had started flowing from the nearby ballroom. In the background, fae dancers moved in a kaleidoscope of moving colors Tabitha couldn't track. There had been something else she had wanted to tell Tom, something important, but perhaps he was right. Perhaps it wasn't important right now. Did he really love her? Could he?

His smile became smug in her silence as if sensing her acceptance. He examined her face again with a deliberate slowness, letting the heat rise again in her cheeks, before stopping with her lips. He pulled her closer when a new voice came from behind.

"I'm sorry, but am I interrupting something?"

Tom instantly sobered and stepped around her, putting himself between her and the newcomer—a fae man equal to him in height. The fae had white hair as long as a maiden's and worn in a queue under an impressive pair of stag antlers. Tom bowed his head. "Of course not, my prince. I was just showing this new human to her room."

"Oh? And was that all you were showing her?" the elegant fae man said skeptically. For a moment, his emerald eyes flashed, and both his front canines and his ears narrowed into sharper points. "I've heard others talking of this new human. They say she comes from the Summer Princess, which I find very interesting. I'm sure there are others who would find it interesting as well."

Tom shook his head, his expression decidedly blank. "She isn't interesting at all."

"No?" His eyebrows rose, his voice a challenge. Understated but deadly. "Well, then it should be no hardship to you to forget her and do the task you were assigned to do." The fae man turned and left, and for a moment, it seemed all they could do was stare after him in silence.

"Who . . . Who was that?" Tabitha asked.

“The Prince of Beasts,” Tom answered without looking at her.

A prince? Tom had mentioned a prince. “Was he the one who . . . Did you—”

“You can’t go near him,” Tom said with a sudden sharpness, “and we must make certain he has no reason to come after you. Which means . . .” Sudden sorrow crossed his face. Then determination. “I have to go.” Tom jerked into motion, shepherding her away from the great hall. “There is another task I need to complete. And you can find our rooms at the top of these stairs.”

“Our rooms?” Tabitha frowned, still looking back at the fae prince.

“The rooms for all the Queen’s elevated servants and thralls, though it’s just me, you, and a couple of children right now,” Tom said, still pushing her toward the stairs.

“Children? The Queen keeps human children?” Tabitha could barely keep up with this.

Tom gestured impatiently to another staircase on the opposite side of the hall, where two children were sliding down the banister without restraint. The adult fae did nothing to stop them and even seemed to be encouraging them to go faster. Climb higher. What if they fell? “The Queen calls them Han’sel and Gret’sel,” Tom said. “They were lost in the woods.”

Of course. “Then we must save them too.”

“Yes. We should save them, but you must go upstairs now.” He gestured again more fervently. “You can have any room you want, even if you have to take out some of my stuff. Just . . . wait for me there, all right? Please?”

He seemed so earnest that Tabitha couldn’t argue. “All right.” She took a few steps

up the stairs, but her eyes never left Tom. She couldn't take another step. She didn't know how to solve all the evils of the Fae Realm, but she couldn't pretend not to notice how much he had changed when the fae prince appeared.

She couldn't just leave him, not when she had come all this way to bring him home.

As soon as he turned back to the crowd, she came down after him, watching him through the mass of fae and faerie beasts the best she could. But he didn't go toward the fae prince, and before Tabitha could determine what his intended destination was, another familiar voice found her instead.

"Oh, good. I found you," said the faerie cat. She stood next to Tabitha's cat, Bandit, with her tail fidgiting with agitation. "We were mingling, and I got some more answers if you still have questions. I'll even give them to you for free as it seems we might have walked into some trouble that I'm sure you'll see is only partially my fault."

"What kind of trouble?" Tabitha said, still tracking Tom's progress through the crowd. But the fae dancers in the ballroom had become unwelcome distractions as they moved in a chaotic swarm, constantly switching partners, striking out on their own, or even floating in the air when the mood struck them.

It was just as she imagined a fae ball would be, of all the dratted luck.

"The Summer Princess is in the Borderlands," the faerie cat said, almost shouting to be heard. "She took over the whole desert kingdom in the southeast, making them all her subjects."

Tabitha blinked, finally giving the cats her full attention. She didn't know anything about the southeastern kingdom. Could it be possible? "But Tom said that the fae only take humans who are stray."

“Yes, that is the Queen’s rule—to take only strays and do subtle magic in the human kingdoms to keep peace between the two realms—but her daughter has decided to do this on her own. And the Queen hasn’t stopped her. The Queen believes her daughter will find the folly of her actions on her own, that such a public display of magic amongst the humans will only cause one of their legendary heroes to rise in vengeance as the old tales go. In fact, many believe that has already taken place. They say that a band of heroes has recently subjugated the Summer Princess, strengthening the Fae Queen’s claim that using more magic in the Mortal Realm will bring trouble.”

Tabitha had a sudden sinking feeling, and she reached down to pick up Bandit, needing the distraction. “But you told them I was a gift of the Summer Princess.”

“And this will make some of the fae believe the opposite, that the Summer Princess is doing well—well enough to flaunt her power by gifting you to the Queen—and so there is no reason that more of them shouldn’t follow in her footsteps, doing more magic and taking more thralls from the Mortal Realm.”

Tabitha couldn’t even imagine how awful that could be. Her whole kingdom could be in danger, just when the cursed plague had come to an end.

And the cat wasn’t done. “I’m afraid this has been a source of conflict in the Fae Courts for some time. The Queen is powerful and still has plenty of her own supporters, but her laws have limited the magic of her subjects, and there are many who resent her for it. A dip in any direction could bring us to the brink of war.”

Tabitha shook herself and looked again for Tom. This was far too much for her to manage on her own. They had to leave as soon as possible. She finally spied him at the front of the ballroom and froze, causing the faerie cat to prompt her again.

“So what do you want to do? Trust me, nothing is more tiresome than a magical fae war.”

Tabitha was still staring. She couldn't think. She couldn't breathe. She had just shared her first kiss with Tom, he told her he loved her, but now he was with the most beautiful fair-haired woman Tabitha had ever seen.

And he was kissing her. Passionately.

The music still played. The fae dancers still spun in heedless abandon, but Tabitha's head shook of its own accord. This was all too much, and she only had one wish.

One more dream for her words to bring to life.

"I want to go home," she said, and the palace around her faded into an endless white.

Chapter 10

Nightmare

As the Fae Queen kissed her human, the cares of her position melted away. It no longer mattered that all three of her daughters conspired against her rule or how the magic of her court was fading. Sure, the human was an indulgence. Being queen meant dealing with problem after problem, but he was the one thing she kept for herself. She wanted to share more with him, even as she broke their kiss. “You know tonight is a special one.”

Tam’lin frowned, innocent confusion on his face. “Because of the coming of spring?”

“Yes,” the Fae Queen said, almost purring with satisfaction. “Because of the coming of Spring. Tonight, we will announce her coming to the whole court.”

She gestured out to the hall at large, which had the unfortunate side-effect of calling one of her stewards to her side. She never could get a moment’s peace.

The brownie bustled over with his scroll, full of self-importance despite his short size. “Your Majesty. I assume he has told you of the new human.”

The Fae Queen shook her head. “What new human?”

“The one sent to you by the Summer Princess.”

The Summer Princess? What was her spiteful daughter planning now? Her smile

became something strangled. “It must have slipped his mind.” She turned back to her thrall. “Tam’lin. Do I have a new human?”

Tam’lin was silent for a moment, as if thinking the matter over. “I don’t remember.”

The Fae Queen sighed. “Of course you don’t.” Tam’lin could hardly remember anything anymore, and he often seemed blank and unfocused.

It was only natural; humans never lasted very long in the Fae Realm. Like a spark of ember, his life would be beautiful and brief. And if he had stayed in the Mortal Realm—unloved and neglected as a stray—his situation would be even worse.

But she had prepared for this. She would treasure him for however long he lasted, and with the coming of Spring, she would have something of his to carry with her after he was gone.

“I will look into this myself,” she said, dismissing them both. “Go and see to our other guests.”

The Fae Queen removed herself from the great hall to find the mirror in her dressing room.

The two realms touched in more places than the mortals seemed to realize. In shadows, dreams, and anything that could carry a reflection. And while most girls wished to become princesses, and most princesses wished to be queens, the Fae Queen still had enough of her own magic to continually foil the attempts her daughters made on her crown.

She spoke to the mirror. “Mirror, mirror in my home, where does the Summer Princess currently roam?”

When the smoky surface of the mirror cleared, a prison of iron took shape before her.

It was just as she thought. The Summer Princess had been bound in iron by a band of human heroes, serving as a lesson for anyone foolish enough to go against the Fae Queen's edicts.

So, who was this new human, and where was she now?

Tabitha stirred on the hard wooden floorboards to the sound of pounding on the back door. Like waking from a dream, the dress shop slowly came into focus around her until she regathered herself enough to answer. A young boy stood there, expectant and eager. "Billy?"

"Hello, miss." He bobbed his head. "Have you had the shop closed all week? Do you have any deliveries for me?"

Tabitha took in the information at a snail's pace. She had so many strange and unsettling thoughts, but with the light of the late afternoon sun shining through the open door, letting in all the normal sounds of the city streets, her thoughts about the Fae Realm seemed so distant and foreign. Could it have been just another dream? Surely it was absurd to imagine that a cat could talk or that a missing prince would declare his love for her.

It was so absurd that her dream had quickly become a nightmare, revealing that the love the prince declared for her couldn't be real.

She tried to focus on the young boy. "You . . . you're here for the deliveries. But you only come on the third day of the week."

Billy frowned at her. "Yes, miss. It is the third day."

She had missed a whole week? She looked over her half-finished projects hanging off the mannequins, including the gown Lady Sabine had wanted to wear to the princess's wedding. The cats peeked around the abandoned mounds of material, and many of the cabinets had been pried open in her absence. It was chaos and decay reminiscent of the Fae Realm, like parts of her dream world had followed her home.

She shook her head, trying to shake the last few traces of sleep away. It wasn't even a very good dream with the way it had ended, and certainly not worth all the trouble it had caused. She might have already failed the shop that had been given to her. Its former mistress wouldn't have stood for such an indulgence; Granny Tailor might have praised Tabitha's imagination and even encouraged her to find her own dream, but never at the expense of what was real.

This shop was real. Her cats were real.

She couldn't waste any more time on dreams.

She turned back to face Billy, now determined. "I'm a bit behind, but I should have some deliveries ready for you tomorrow." She would just have to keep the shop closed and work through the night to finish the current load. "Would you mind coming back then? I'll pay you extra."

She would somehow find a way to finish this tonight.

Chapter 11

Dream within a Dream

After the cats had been fed and returned to their proper places around the shop, Tabitha spent all evening working through her unfinished projects. She completed the final stitch of Lady Sabine's dress and allowed herself to rest her head on the table just for a moment, but when she opened her eyes again, shadows had fallen over her work. The dress in front of her was no longer Lady Sabine's, but a dress she had worked on three years ago, when Tom was still a cat.

A familiar voice came from behind her as if in confirmation. "Those ruffles are hideous, Tabs. You cannot save that one; it should be burned."

Tom. Another dream. Another distraction. And she didn't have the time or patience for any of his nonsense. She waved a hand back behind her as if to shoo him away. He was nothing but an ornery tabby cat, and she was still angry at him. "There is nothing wrong with a few ruffles. They make the world a bit more exciting. Now, hush or find something more useful to do."

He laughed at her then, footsteps only coming closer. She could feel his light touch on her shoulder, his breath on the shell of her ear. "Well, you are fiery tonight. I think I like it."

Tabitha peered back at him, curious in spite of herself. Light-hearted mirth shown in his hazel eyes and the subtle quirk of his lips . . . But she didn't want to think about his lips. "This is a dream, but you . . . you still remember me?"

“Of course I do. I told you I could.”

Her frustration resurfaced. At him. At her. At the whole situation. “But you can’t even remember your own name!”

He took a step back, his face filled with perfect puzzlement. “I do. It’s Tam—”

“No.”

“Tom—”

“No!” She had no more time or desire to be coy with him. “Your name is Leopold, and you are the Crown Prince of Umbrae. You shouldn’t even be talking to a girl like me.”

If anything, Tom only looked more confused. “A girl like you?”

Did she really have to say it? “A commoner. A street urchin. A daughter of a . . .” She stopped, unwilling to say what everyone thought of her mother, even while she was trying to push Tom away with her words. She finished with a truth that wasn’t nearly so raw. “I don’t even know who my father was.”

Tom laughed. “Well, if you don’t know, then why should I care who he was? That’s just one less person I would have to share you with. I may not remember a whole lot, but I know I must be terrible at sharing. Besides, weren’t you just telling me that my father is a king and I’m a prince? I’m certain that means that I can talk to whomever I wish.” His eyebrows danced. He was laughing at her. Then he stepped closer again, like the danger intrigued him. “And I rather like talking to you. Perhaps that is why I dream of you so often.”

“And that fae woman I saw you with? Do you dream of her too?” Tabitha shook her

head. Tom only looked confused again and confronting him like this wasn't as satisfying as it should have been. And perhaps she wasn't being fair. When Granny Tailor had encouraged Tabitha to find her own dream, she had only thought of Tom. But it had still been her wish, her dream. And perhaps it had been more selfish than she had realized. His kiss had taken her by surprise, making her see stars, but before that, she had only wanted Tom back the way he was before.

Her silent confidant and protector. Her secret friend who was just her own.

Her cat.

But that wasn't who Tom was anymore. Perhaps that was never who he was. He was a prince, and—even if she brought him home, even if he claimed to love her—she couldn't expect to keep him.

He would have his own dreams to pursue.

And some of those dreams might very well include another woman. He could be destined to marry another royal, while Tabitha, like her mother before her, might only be someone to whisper sweet lies to as a mildly pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

In any case, it wasn't something she wanted to continue to examine right now.

She could press on with only the facts she knew for certain. "I shouldn't be mad at you. We were only ever friends, and you can kiss anyone you like. I just wanted to help you, but if you're happier there . . ." She stopped. How could he be happier there? "Which would you choose, Tom? Can you choose, or is that part of the magic?"

Tom paused before answering, instantly becoming more sober and unsure. "I don't . . ."

“You don’t remember?” Tabitha took a step closer.

She couldn’t stand to see him so altered, no matter what else happened between them.

“I was stray, so the Prince of Beasts took me in to be the Queen’s thrall,” he said, as if those were the only words that could ground him.

“Prince of Beasts?” The way Tom kept centering on this had to be important.

“He is the Queen’s grandson and son of the Autumn Princess. And . . .” Tom took an extra beat to grapple with the words, like he could only say them with great effort. “He still speaks to me sometimes.”

“About what?”

Tom threw out his hands in exasperation. “I don’t know. I never know. It seems that we must speak for hours, but at the end, I never remember what was said.” He frowned. “Is that odd?”

Perhaps not as odd as it should have been. The fae prince had told Tom to forget her, and perhaps that was a command he could enforce if needed. “And you still don’t remember anything else?”

“Only that . . . There are emerald eyes. A voice in my head . . . I have to serve the Queen. She has to love me.”

The beautiful fae woman was the Fae Queen? He had been kissing his captor? “Why?”

“Well, if she loves me, then . . .” He paused, holding his head. It couldn’t be an easy memory to access. In fact, it looked like he was in pain, but Tom was still her

courageous hero. She believed he would keep trying no matter how hard things got, and they could figure this out together. She couldn't kiss him again, but she took his hand, and that seemed to help as he focused on her in earnest. "Maybe she'll tell me something—something he'll find useful?"

"He's using you as a spy," Tabitha concluded. He was a pawn in a dangerous game, and it could come crashing down at any moment. She never should have left him.

She should have been strong enough to help him without expecting anything in return.

And if he still wanted the Fae Queen or some other royal woman . . . she could accept it. She would steel her heart and find some way to accept it. She just needed to bring him home—bright-eyed and sober—so she could know for sure.

"Can I help you? Please?" Tom's pride would make it difficult for him to accept the offer, but would he do it for her?

Already he was turning to look over his shoulder at something unseen, not even given a chance to fully react to her words. He winced. "They're calling me. I can't stop them."

Maybe he couldn't. But she would—no matter what it took. "I'll bring you back. I'll let you choose. And then, I'll let you go if I have to—let you be the prince you were always meant to be. Just promise me that it won't be too late. That you'll keep fighting until I get there."

"Fighting? Fighting what?"

She was clasping him with both hands now, strengthening her grip. She still couldn't kiss him—not with his mind so clearly altered, not without knowing that he would be

hers to keep—but she would hold his hand for as long as she could. “Fight for me and whatever part of your mind is still your own. Fight for your Tabitha and for my Tom, and the power of two dreamers who meet and become one.”

Tom’s figure flickered again. A look of panic crossed his face, and then he was gone. Replaced by someone else. A fair-haired woman with remarkable elven beauty stood in a gossamer gown.

Her empty gray eyes didn’t acknowledge Tabitha’s presence.

Her berry-red lips didn’t move.

But something whispered with the breathy voice of the wind.

Tabitha, please come.

The Fae Queen. That had been her, but also the same voice Tabitha had heard in her previous dreams. Had the queen been aware of all the times Tabitha and Tom had walked together? Tabitha wasn’t sure, but when she woke, she easily found Tom’s hair bead and the brass key from the witch’s cottage in her apron pocket. All real.

And Bandit was waiting by the door as if the cat already knew he would be needed.

She scooped him up, ready to face her fears. She had to go and find her Tom.

And while she didn’t know how exactly she would get back to the Fae Realm, she knew someone else who might.

The Marquis of Carabus.

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Chapter 12

Share Your Dreams

Tabitha marched over to the neighboring city of Carabus, trying to channel the strength of an invading army. Her only weapon was a cat, but Bandit did oblige her, hissing when one of the stewards tried to shoo her away. Really, the lone steward was the only one to challenge her. The guards (wearing their own colors of white and emerald green and not the king's silver and black) mostly dismissed her.

She wasn't a threat. Just an eccentric cat woman on a mission.

She might have marched her way through the castle to wherever its lord was hiding, but a portrait in the main hall stopped her short. It wasn't on the wall yet—just propped against the table along with a few other bundles that must have belonged to the princess who would soon be the mistress of the castle. Tabitha recognized the spunky girl pictured as an adolescent youth, flanked by her royal parents, but she was staring at the fourth figure in the painting when she heard the sound of boots behind her.

She had never seen Tom's human form in the waking world—not as a boy or as a man. It was both wondrous and haunting to see that he looked exactly the same as she had dreamed him to be.

Well, almost the same.

The boots stepped closer. She felt she must explain all the warring thoughts inside her

soul, but she wasn't sure how to start except to reach for the portrait in front of her.

"His hair is longer," she said, tracing a line down the prince's painted cheek to show where it hung in their last meeting. "He's thinner too. Or maybe just taller?" She squinted and then shook her head. "No. He's thinner and taller." Which was a relief. Tom still had an inch or two over her. "And I thought he might be fae with the way he was dressed, but he wasn't." Her index finger hovered over his hazel eyes. "He stared at me for such a long time. Then he said my name. And I knew . His eyes are the same."

That was when she turned to face Archie, a bit helplessly. How could she have left Tom all alone? She needed help to get him back, but her memories seemed dreamlike and muddled.

How could she possibly explain it all?

Archie was already looking at her with wide eyes. "You saw Leo? Human Leo?"

"You think I'm mad. You don't believe me." Tabitha lowered her head, looking to her cat Bandit for strength. She was lashing out, but she needed Archie's help. She was determined to keep trying until he understood, but there was so much to tell, and some of the details still seemed too personal to share. The words spilled out in unorganized bursts.

"I didn't believe me either. I dreamed of him so much I thought I must be dreaming again. And it was always the same dream. I saw him—my Tom, your Leo—but it was like he was trapped." She rushed ahead, now speaking of her final dream as it was the clearest image in her mind and perhaps the most important one for her to share. "Then there was a woman . . . She seemed—perhaps not entirely evil but empty , and she might be hurting him somehow. Keeping him. I tried to hold on to him so many times, but there was always some magic keeping him away."

Archie shook his head, perfectly confused. “And it was a dream?”

“I thought it was,” she said, trying to backtrack again. “The same sort of dream for the last three years—not every night, but often enough. Then, I thought I recognized a few of the trees. And I just couldn’t stand it anymore. I had to see. I went into the woods, and there he was. Like the dream again. And this time . . . I tried to grab onto him, like in all the other dreams, but he left something behind. He had this in his hair.” She held up her palm to show him the small colored bead. “It wasn’t a dream.”

That didn’t help. Archie still looked confused. “So, he’s still in the woods?”

Her shoulders slumped. This wasn’t working. She never should have left Tom alone, and her despair only made her story more muddled. “I know I should have found a way to bring him back with me, but it was like the dream. He wouldn’t come, and I couldn’t hold him. There is something there. Or someone?” She wasn’t sure how to describe the influence the queen and her magic had on him, but Tabitha had come here imagining herself as a warrior, and she wouldn’t allow herself to retreat. “And the way he spoke—like he was drugged or half-asleep. He’s wrong, and I need you to tell me how to fix him,” Tabitha said, reaching the crux of the matter.

She had no more words. She met Archie’s eyes more earnestly, ready for the lord to pass his judgment. “You think I’m mad? Everyone always thinks I’m mad.”

“No,” Archie said quickly. “Of course I don’t. I’ve been looking for him too. We all have. We just never—but we should have known you would be the key, even if kissing him in his cat form didn’t work.” He gestured for her to follow him to the next room. “Come. Let me show you what I’ve found. And next time you see him, we’ll have a plan.”

Tabitha was welcomed into the library, the whole place bedecked in white and emerald green, and eventually she got more of the full story out and in the right order.

Archie never said anything to contradict her tale. Instead, he pulled out book after book, looking through the Ogre Marquis's old records about the fae for a way to help her return to the Fae Realm and find Tom again.

"There are a few places our realms are supposed to naturally meet," Archie said, "but most sources say that to enter the Fae Realm, you need to be brought in by a fae or faerie beast, just like we would have to pull a fae out of their rings for them to enter our world."

Tabitha nodded. Tom had brought her through the faerie ring on her first visit, and she didn't expect the magic she had used in the Fae Realm to work once she left it. "So what can I do?"

"You could try to summon a faerie guide from the ring," he tried. "Maybe that cat?"

Tabitha shook her head. "I don't know her name. I never even asked." Maybe she should have, but at the time she had been so focused on Tom and wary of anything that would make the Fae Realm seem more real and her stay more permanent.

"And she probably wouldn't tell you even if you had asked," Archie said evenly. "Faeries are careful about things like that. But even if you don't have her true name, she could still come if you gave her a reason to."

"Like what?"

Archie shrugged. "I don't know. What do cats like? Dead mice? A saucer of milk? I can usually get a few garden gnomes to appear if I leave out some radishes. They aren't a bad sort, just self-interested. If your cat is the same, then she might be your best chance to get back there."

"And if I do . . . Will I be able to save him?" She had to be able to save him.

“I don’t know. I’ve been looking . . .” Archie pulled out another thick tome. “You know about the old matron stories, right? About the fae? They say the stories were given to the first matrons by the fates who serve the Light-bringer. They keep a record of the past, so that’s where most of the stories are supposed to come from, but they can also be more like prophecies—something that hasn’t happened yet. They repeat themselves like cycles through time. One of those stories . . .”

“Tell me.” She was long past being embarrassed that the former miller’s son could read far better than she could. She would sacrifice far more than her dignity to bring Tom home.

“A human prince is bound to a Fae Queen. A normal girl is able to save him, but there are other parts . . . Something about the Queen making a sacrifice to solidify her power at the coming of spring? Something about a child?” He scrunched his face. “You’re not pregnant, right?”

“No,” Tabitha said, but she still ducked her head as if she were guilty. She had never even kissed a boy before Tom, but no one ever believed that with how the stain of her mother’s reputation still lingered.

And when she thought of Tom’s kiss now, the one that might not have been truly hers to claim, she felt more than a little wicked.

Archie put up a hand, looking a bit flustered. “I didn’t think you were. I don’t know what it all means. But if this is all supposed to happen as some sort of spring ritual . . .” He shook his head again and pushed the book away. “It could be dangerous, but you don’t have to go alone. Wait until after the wedding, and I will go with you. Ainsley will too.”

“I appreciate it, my lord—”

“It’s Archie,” the marquis insisted, scowling. “Ainsley never liked it when I used her title, and now, I suppose I know why. But we are friends, aren’t we? Leo is to be my brother-in-law. And if Ainsley had her way, she would already have moved you into the castle and declared you her sister.”

The castle? With all those people and their dreams crying for her attention all at once? Horror crossed over Tabitha at the thought, and Archie put his hands up in response.

“I know,” he said. “I’ve told her so many times not to rush things, not to push so hard . . . but that’s just the way she is,” he said in the resigned but well-contented way of a man who knew his bride well enough to understand her faults and love her anyway.

Tabitha didn’t say anything. She couldn’t. But she never should have kissed Tom. A miller’s son had become a marquis, but that didn’t mean she could be a princess. Just the thought of living in a castle—could there be anything so terrifying?

Even the shop that Granny Tailor gave her was too much.

Her eyes locked on the table’s runner—an emerald green background and a white stag. She just wanted to help her friend. She had no business dreaming of anything else.

Archie shook his head. “We don’t want to scare you off, but we never wanted to make you feel unwelcome, like we wouldn’t drop anything to help you—well, almost anything. But three days? He’s been gone for three years , and you don’t think he could wait that much longer?”

No. Tom couldn’t wait. She had seen how empty he looked, and nothing could be more certain. And if this all centered on the coming of spring, they really didn’t have any time at all.

What if the sacrifice mentioned was meant to be Tom himself, if he had lost too much of himself to be useful to the Queen? She couldn't lose him that way. "I know I can't properly explain it, but I believe this is something I must do now, even if it's on my own."

Archie eventually agreed. "I suppose a solo quest for true love matches the stories well enough, but if you aren't back after the wedding . . . Well, we'll have to look for you too."

Tabitha read the tension in the words. Of course they would look for her, like they were already searching for Tom. But it was hard to have much hope for success with so little progress.

But Tabitha had seen Tom. She knew it was him, and she would do anything to get him back.

And once Archie gave her the information she needed for the summoning spell, Tabitha was ready to leave.

She turned, catching sight of another white stag that made her pause. It might make her sound mad again, but Archie seemed so desperate to do something, she couldn't keep it to herself.

She held Bandit close for courage as she faced Archie again. "There is one thing you can do to help, even if you can't come. Will you . . . can you get rid of the stags?" They reminded her too much of the Prince of Beasts, and that seemed far more significant now that she knew the fae drew more power from human belief.

Especially with how Tom spoke of emerald eyes.

Removing the fae prince's symbol from Archie's holding might lessen the fae's

influence.

Archie rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed. “You aren’t the first to say that I should remove them. They’re the Ogre Marquis’s colors, and I should replace them with my own. But I’m a miller’s son. I don’t have any colors, so what would I replace them with? A field of wheat? And they would have to be altered again when I marry Ainsley—her house will always outrank any I might create for myself.”

Wheat. Yellow. Tabitha nodded, seeing the problem like another gown in need of alterations. The colors needed to change, but perhaps not so much that it would be an impossible task. “Replace the green with yellow, and then you can keep the white. Just not a stag. A cat? No, a lion.” She smiled, looking at the burly and blond miller’s son, but also thinking of Tom. “Yes, make the stag into a lion. I’m certain that will help.”

Chapter 13

What Dreams May Come?

Leopold Tamias Lynister.

Still hearing the echoes of his last summoning, Leo stood in his own dressing room inside the White Palace. The mirror showed him nothing but his own reflection, but as he looked over the tunic the Fae Queen had provided for him to wear, he smiled. He still could remember a few traces of his last conversation with his dream girl, Tabitha. “There,” he said, as if the girl was still beside him. “You see? It’s much better without any ruffles.”

Nothing answered him, but it was just as well. He hadn’t even managed to convince himself that the words he said were true. The faerie tailors had matchless skill, but no true artistry; everything in the Fae Realm was nothing but an uncanny and soulless copy of something in the Mortal Realm.

The streamlined perfection of his appearance was as empty as a tomb.

The only thing out of place was the missing hair bead.

And when he stared at the small gap in his appearance, he remembered more about his dream girl. Tabitha hadn’t called him Tam’lin or even Leo.

She had called him Tom.

Leo shook his head, trying to clear it. Trying to determine which inner voice to listen to.

Tam'lin, where are you?

Talking to his dream girl, Leo had regained a few of his memories, but they weren't the same memories he had before. Before he became a cat, before entering the Fae Realm, he might have enjoyed spending some extra time on his appearance, making certain he had the latest fashion to stand above the rest of the court. He used snide and clever words, danced all the latest steps, and filled his hunting cabinet with rare trophies, all in an effort to remain on top.

Now, preparing himself for the Fae Queen's feast to celebrate the coming spring, he only wished the process was quicker and led to something he truly enjoyed.

Perhaps it was better to wear a fur coat than go through all this fuss.

Tam'lin, come to me.

Leo turned from the mirror and entered the halls of the White Palace, certain the Queen would summon him again if he didn't answer her soon. A few of the fae servants slipped around him like shadows, and some even bowed as he passed, but his feet dragged.

Once, he was certain he had enjoyed being a prince, along with the prospect of a beautiful woman waiting to latch onto his arm and watching others bow and scrape before him.

Now, he wondered if he had only enjoyed it because he hadn't had anything else to compare it to. The beauty around him was empty, the bows almost meaningless. He could never show his true self to the Queen without risking her displeasure, and to

everyone else, he was merely a human and a prince.

Sometimes, his dream girl seemed to see him as a cat. Sometimes, a hero. But she always seemed to see him truly, as if she could peer into the very depths of his soul and see not only what he was, but what he should be.

He never felt like just a soulless prince to her .

And once, he would have ignored the children moving in the next room he passed as someone else's trouble, but now he could only think of Tabitha's previous request—that he find some way to set them free. And he didn't care if he risked the wrath of the Queen and the loss of the empty position he now held. He wanted to do this one thing for his dream girl, even if he wasn't able to manage anything else.

He wanted to become the sort of selfless hero Tabitha already thought he could be.

So, in the bustle of the preparations for the Spring Celebration, Leo stopped his progress down the hall and went to the next room. He greeted the children, called Han'sel and Gret'sel, and told them that it was time to play a game.

“What kind of game?” Han'sel asked somewhat suspiciously. The towheaded boy was the oldest at about eight or nine, but at the moment, he looked like he might be even older than that. Tired. Used up. Perhaps the same way Leo looked after dancing and feasting with the fae past the time of mortal endurance. Past the point where he would collapse, or his feet might bleed.

And the girl wouldn't look at Leo at all.

“We'll go out into the woods,” Leo tried first, not certain how much he could explain.

The boy shook his head. “The Queen says we'll get lost if we go there.”

“Only if you don’t know where you want to go. But I think you’re smart enough to find your own way home.” The boy was certainly smarter than Leo wanted him to be and was asking far too many questions, taking far too much time.

The Queen could summon Leo again at any moment.

Han’sel frowned down at a fist of cake left over from the night before. It left a small trail of crumbs on the marble floor. “Like we could mark a path back for ourselves?”

Leo nodded, impatiently checking the hall again for any eavesdroppers. “You could try that. But I’d rather you find a path to somewhere you really want to go.” It seemed he would have to just come out and say it. “Did you never have a home other than this place? Parents? Friends?”

“I think we did,” Han’sel answered, halting as if rediscovering some previously buried pain. “We had a father, but we didn’t like our new mother much. She said we had to do all our lessons and chores, go to bed early, and eat greens for supper. We wanted to go to the woods where we could play for however long we wanted to and eat sweets every day.”

“I see,” Leo said, now seeing the whole picture with the same clarity as he had seen himself in the mirror. “The Queen never did learn your real names, did she? You ran from home, made yourself strays, and all she had to do to keep you was give you sweets or anything else you foolishly thought you wanted.” Again, Leo found himself talking to himself more than the boy before him, but Han’sel still dropped his head in shame.

“Yes. But maybe it’s not as fun as we thought it would be.”

“No, it isn’t,” Leo agreed. “But this is good news. If the Queen doesn’t know your true names, you can leave, and she can’t call you back. So, do you want to go home?”

The boy nodded, and so did the girl, even if she had taken to hiding behind her brother.

“Then don’t mark a path to come back,” Leo said. “Forget any tie you might have to this place—even your own names if you have to. Just go into the woods and keep going until you find someone who will give you more than sweets. Someone who wants you to grow into something better.”

“And will you come with us?” the girl asked, speaking for the first time. Light, she had her short hair in pigtails and couldn’t be more than five or six.

They really needed someone to go with them, but he would never be allowed.

Leo still smiled for her. “I’ll go with you for as long as I can before the Queen summons me. But even if I disappear, I want you to go, and I can make certain no one else follows.”

When Tabitha first went out to find Tom, she had left in a rush. She had not prepared herself or the shop for a week-long journey. This time, wishing and hoping that she could take the same journey again and have it not be too late, she kept the shop closed for the rest of the day and finished Lady Sabine’s gown and anything else that could be done in one afternoon.

She passed the final deliveries to Billy, asking him to look in on the cats and not to expect her back until perhaps after the princess’s wedding.

Then, that evening, she took Bandit and the last of her projects with her to the borders of Castletown. Deep inside the Darkwood, she knelt beside the faerie ring, presented her offering, and tried to think of a name that the cat might respond to.

“Fayette? Little Faerie Cat?” she tried. “Will you bargain with me again?”

Nothing. Tabitha wasn't sure what she had expected; faeries were nothing if self-interested even if they weren't also cats, but the oppressive stillness made her want to wail.

Especially when she considered she only had herself to blame. It was her own reckless use of magic that had brought her home prematurely. What if she wasn't able to get back? Tom would waste away, and it would be all her fault. Tears pricked her eyes. "I didn't mean to leave him, you know. I shouldn't have left him. I just . . . and he just . . . Will you please help me?"

The mushroom ring was empty except for her offering. The forest was still. There was no one to address her pleading to, only the cat in her arms that she looked down on in despair.

And by some gift of the fates, Bandit answered her with his own small mew .

That was when the leftover winter sludge moved from the forest floor, stirred by a sudden breeze. The faerie cat appeared, sitting on fresh shoots of green inside the ring. "Well, I suppose I knew that you both would be crawling back to me eventually, but you better be ready to make this worth my while."

Chapter 14

Dream Team

“ M y name is not Fayette, you know,” the cat said indignantly, sitting in the faerie ring with her pointed nose in the air. “Why should I wish to be known only as a little faerie? And it seems I’m not so small for you not to recognize how much you need my help.”

Tabitha, kneeling by the ring with her skirts growing damp at the knees, was so grateful to see the cat that she almost forgot herself and apologized.

She might have even thanked her for coming.

But faerie creatures could see even those small things as an acknowledgment of a favor granted, and she couldn’t mess this up, making the cat think that merely showing up and responding to a name she did not prefer was all that Tabitha required of her.

“I do wish to return to the Fae Realm. I want to help Tom.”

The faerie cat only blinked at her in acknowledgment. “Yes, I assumed you might. So why were you so quick to leave him when he was in your sights? Don’t tell me that you didn’t know what one of your errant wishes could do, because I won’t believe it.”

Tabitha felt hot and cold, seeing the scene again. Having to explain. “I was just . . . surprised. When I saw him last, he wasn’t alone. He was with the Fae Queen, and she

was kissing him. He was kissing her.” And she couldn’t say the words without feeling it as a betrayal.

Human hearts were not always the most logical things.

But the cat only looked confused. “Of course she was. I told you he was a thrall, that the high fae feed off of human emotions and dreams. What did you think that would look like?”

Tabitha frowned, but in every matron story she knew, faeries rarely fought with blades alone. Instead, they used magic, trickery, even seduction. It was only natural that a fae queen would be a master of all of those skills. The Queen would be desired by all who saw her, and she would use that desire to her advantage.

Tabitha couldn’t blame Tom for falling for that kind of manipulation.

And as if she could see Tabitha coming to that conclusion, the cat continued. “Should he have to be screaming for him to merit your sympathy?”

Tabitha had already felt sorry and low, but this was a blow she hadn’t been expecting. The night the guard had cornered her in the alley, Tom had jumped in without hesitation. He had known something was wrong even as a cat. But what if someone else had seen her and thought of her mother? Would they have assumed her a willing participant, happy to trade away her virtue for some momentary comfort?

She hadn’t screamed.

She hadn’t fought.

She hadn’t even run until Tom came in to help. And if the man had been handsome, rich, and at least appeared a little closer to her age . . . why would anyone think to

pity her?

But it still would have been wrong.

Tom was wrong , his eyes so often clouded over, and he couldn't properly consent to anything in his current state. She owed it to her friend to put him right and see what he wanted then.

That was what she had decided before she reached out to Archie and returned to find the faerie cat. But . . . “I did not imagine that he would enjoy it. I expected . . . Or rather, I hoped he would accept my help and return with me.” She had hoped that he loved her as he said he did and would not be tempted to stray so quickly, even for a fae queen. And when those high-minded dreams had been disappointed, she had been far too quick to think the worst of him. “But I realize that it was wrong and that he would have been unable to control how he responds to her.”

Admitting her harsh judgment of Tom had been a harrowing of her soul, but the cat was still unimpressed. “So your prince is weak, and you are willing to forgive him. I'm sure that is very noble of you and would serve you well enough in evaluating the hearts of men in the Mortal Realm but let me see if I understand this all correctly. You were with your prince, doing everything you could to persuade him to return with you, and he ran off to be with the Fae Queen? Is that correct?”

“Yes. I spoke to him. I kissed him. And then it seemed—at least for a moment—like he might have remembered everything.” Or at least, he hadn't seemed as confused as he had before, and Tabitha had some reason to hope that he had remembered. He had behaved in ways that took her breath away but still seemed only natural for Tom, a human version of her feline friend. “But then—”

“The Fae Queen appeared?” the cat guessed.

“No. Another man came first. A fae prince with antlers on his head and emerald eyes.”

This answer seemed to fill the cat with satisfaction, as if it was the answer she had been waiting for. “And what did this prince do?”

“Nothing. Tom told me to go.” Tabitha said the words quickly, dismissively, but then she remembered something else. Something important. “The fae prince wasn’t happy to see us together. He said he might be interested in me, so Tom. . . he . . . put himself in front of me. He said I wasn’t interesting, and that he would have no trouble forgetting me. He protected me.” There really was no other way to interpret Tom’s actions, now that she knew who that fae prince was.

The prince with emerald eyes.

And with Tom’s memories at least temporarily restored, he would have already known who the fae prince was and what would be wanted of him—even better than Tabitha had at that moment. Tom had known that the fae prince wanted him to spy on the Fae Queen and what that would require. But instead of fighting and potentially putting Tabitha in danger of the fae prince’s wrath, he had gone along with it.

She had returned ready to forgive Tom for his weakness, but he hadn’t been weak at all.

He was still the heroic prince of her dreams.

But Tabitha never believed that she deserved such a hero. Perhaps that was the true reason she was so quick to condemn Tom for his actions. She knew she wasn’t a princess and never believed she could be loved by a prince (or even a goodman of any class or trade), so part of her seemed determined to make him a rogue instead. And it hadn’t been fair to either of them.

It seemed that there were some dreams she couldn't grant for others without first granting a dream of her own; she couldn't see and love Tom fully without accepting and respecting the love he showed for her. That was the power it took for two dreamers to meet as one.

"I just wish he would have told me that was what he was doing."

The faerie cat scoffed at this. "You know this prince? And you expected that he should wish to burden you with his pain and tell you exactly what was being done to him?"

No, Tom would never do that. It might be the only fault she could still find in him. He had the stubborn pride of a prince. The pride of a cat. But how she admired it some days.

What she wouldn't give for a fraction of that man's confidence.

What she wouldn't give to have him at her side again. And even when she struggled to make herself believe that she deserved a partner like him, she couldn't seem to stop wanting him.

Tabitha quickly reached for the bundle she had brought, needing the distraction. "I know I was wrong, and I will apologize to him when I see him again, but I have no need to apologize to you. Only to ask you if you will accept my bargain. Will you escort me back to the Fae Queen's palace if you are able to make that journey in the fabulous pair of boots I have brought for you?"

She showed off the offering she had left inside the faerie ring (a small pair of shoes that had been made to match the cat's dress), because in all the chaos, it seemed the most logical thing to do.

And before she knew it, she was standing before a faerie cat wearing high-heeled boots.

The cat smiled. “Well, at least you have learned to make a proper bargain.”

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Chapter 15

Déjà Vu

With the faerie cat there to help her through the ring, Tabitha had intended to make herself appear directly in the White Palace. But perhaps some part of her thought it would be more logical for her to retrace her previous route exactly, because when the mist cleared and she could make sense of her surroundings again, she stood by the witch's cottage.

It wasn't as inviting as it was before. The door hung open, letting out a moan when the wind moved through it, but Tabitha didn't fear it either. Fallen leaves crackled under her feet as she moved closer. She hadn't intended to come here, but perhaps the fates were telling her that she had some unfinished business left inside?

After taking a few more steps, she realized that it wasn't just the wind moaning. Someone was inside. Someone in pain.

She ran and saw the witch lying in a crumpled heap by her oven.

Dead.

The moaning behind her abruptly ceased. It became a child's voice. "I didn't mean to kill her," he said.

Tabitha turned and found two towheaded and dirty-faced children huddled by the kitchen door. Then everything made sense, and the sick horror of the situation made

Tabitha want to crumble in on herself. But for the children, she had to be strong. “Are you Han’sel? Gret’sel?”

The boy shook his head. “That’s what the Fae Queen called us. They’re not our real names.”

Tabitha nodded, crouching so the children would see her at eye-level. “It’s all right to keep your names hidden, but you can call me Tabitha. I heard that you might be living with the Fae Queen. I asked my friend if he would rescue you.”

“The prince wanted to help us,” the boy agreed. “He stayed with us until the Queen called him away. He said he would make sure that she was too distracted to come after us.”

“Of course he did.” Tabitha had been so distracted herself that she had almost forgotten that she had asked Tom to help the other captive humans, but naturally he had come through anyway. “And then what did you do next?”

“The prince told us to keep going until we found ourselves home. He said that people only get lost in the woods if they don’t know for certain where they are going.” The boy frowned thoughtfully. “But I don’t think I was as certain as I should have been. We’ve been gone for a long time, and I was afraid that our parents might be cross with us or might not want us back at all.”

It wasn’t an unreasonable fear. The children were children still, but who knew how time passed from realm to realm? Any home they had could no longer be open to them.

The boy continued. “And when we met the witch . . . she seemed so nice. But she offered us those sweets, and I remembered what the prince said: be careful of anyone who gives you sweets without greens. And it’s true. Her love wasn’t the true kind,

and she only wanted to eat us up. She reached for my sister and I . . . I shoved her back. I didn't know she was so old she would break!"

Tabitha glanced at the wide-eyed girl behind the boy and quickly shook her head. "That isn't your fault. You protected your sister as any valiant knight should."

The boy cried, tracks of tears already marking his dirty face. "I don't want to be a knight! I don't want any more stories or games. I want to go home. I was just afraid . . . What if there is no place left for us?"

Well, this was at least a problem she could fix, drawing the sobbing boy into her arms. "There will be a place for you, though it might not be exactly what you remember. And this is what I want you to do." She took the brass key from her pocket and handed it to him. "You must be a pair of dreamers, so I want you to take this key as a token. It saved me once from this place and then it brought me home. I believe it will do the same for you."

She waited for the boy to take the key and give her a solemn nod.

"Picture your home," Tabitha instructed. "Get the key to take you there. And if you find your parents there, you stay. But if you don't, tell anyone who will listen that you have a home at Granny Tailor's old shop in Castletown of Umbrae, and I will be there to make certain it is true." Tabitha might not be old enough to be the natural mother of children their age, but she always had a thing for strays.

Perhaps it was time she let some more humans in amongst the cats.

"You promise?" the boy asked, trying his best to rub his tears away. "And you won't give us sweets without greens?"

"I will do the very best that I can. I would take you with me now, but there is

somewhere else I must go.”

“To save the prince?” The boy exchanged a glance with his sister, sharing something between them. “The Queen keeps him so close, I don’t think he always saw us. Not until he told us to run from her and anyone who tries to give us sweets without greens. But if he knows the Queen is like that, then he must know he shouldn’t stay with her.”

Tabitha reached for the answer Tom had given her. “He doesn’t have a choice. She has his name.”

“Couldn’t he change it?”

Change his name? “Perhaps.” It was such a simple solution, but of course she hadn’t thought of it before. “But that would take a lot to give up a name. It’s what connects him to his family and what makes him a prince.”

The boy was undeterred. “You could give him another name instead—like you said you’d take us if our home wasn’t there anymore.”

“I am going to try.” She was certain that if she tried to move herself and the faerie cat again, they would make it to the palace, perhaps in the middle of the Spring Celebration.

And if offering Tom another name to cling to was all she needed to do, and if he was willing to accept it, then perhaps she had found the way to bring him home.

She just needed him to hold on a little longer.

Leopold Tamias Lynister.

The fair-haired queen called him back to her chamber even faster than Leo had feared, already knowing what he had done. At times, it seemed as though she must have eyes everywhere.

“You let the children go?” she said without preamble, a coldness in her gaze.

Leo bowed his head and didn’t try to deny it. “I am sorry, my queen.”

“You should be. You know how easy it is for children their age to get lost in the woods and how dangerous it can be.”

Leo thought she might strike him with her magic. Perhaps he even welcomed it. He knew that he had to please the Queen, that she must love him, but a rebellious part of him tried to test her anyway. Something, anything to crack the facade of perfection around him.

She paused and gave him a more indulgent look. “But I can understand why you did it.”

“You do?” That would surprise him greatly.

The Queen laughed. “Of course I do. I’ve kept enough humans to know how jealous you can become of one another.” She brushed her fingers over his arm, and he did his best to seem like he enjoyed it. “Is that also why you kept that other girl away from me? You were worried she would steal my attention away from you? I saw that you were with her as well, allowing her to return to her own realm.”

Jealous? The Queen thought he was jealous? But if she kept other humans like pets and animals, perhaps it made sense for them to regress into such petty squabbles.

And Leo wasn’t about to contradict her now.

“I didn’t want anyone to see her,” he agreed, his hand reaching for the missing hair bead unconsciously. “You’re not angry with me?”

“I should be.” Her hand fell to rest on her flat stomach. “But Spring is on her way here, and perhaps some jealousy is good for you if it brings you your former spark. Perhaps you still have a few more stories for me, and that would please me ever so much.”

Leo nodded. “I’m trying to remember.” That much was true at least. He had sworn himself to the fae prince in order to rid his kingdom of plague, but he was trying to remember the specific deal, certain he must have left an opening for himself somewhere.

The magical bargain had to be proven invalid if he were to ever return home.

“I know you are,” she answered, almost purring with pleasure. “And I long to show you how little need you have for such petty jealousies. If only there were time.”

The Queen started kissing him after that, her hands wandering suggestively up his shirt. The familiarity of the movement filled him with an excitement that quickly devolved into self-loathing and dread. His memories were still so cloudy. Had they gone that far before? Had he enjoyed it, or at least been made to let her think that he did? And, more importantly, would he be expected to allow it to happen now, when it would only feel like he was simultaneously betraying himself, the Queen, and also someone else.

A girl who still held his missing hair bead.

But a knock sounded, and a brownie voice called for the Queen. An interruption so welcome Leo would have kissed the brownie far more eagerly than the Queen, even though he knew that Bramble disliked humans and held far more jealousy for the

Queen's attention than Leo ever had. "The feast has been prepared, my queen."

"Yes, Bramble. We are coming." The Queen stepped back from Leo with a sigh. "We will announce Spring's coming to the court and then perhaps we shall have time for a celebration of our own."

The suggestive look in her eyes settled it. Leo had been determined to make himself a distraction so the children might escape, and the Queen would lose interest in discovering anything more about his dream girl, but he couldn't be made to do anything like this again.

He would find a way to end things tonight, even when it became difficult for him to remember anything but the missing hair bead.

Even if he had to forget his own name.

Tabitha lasted for as long as it took for the children to disappear using the key. Then everything seemed to hit her all at once. Just like them, she was weak. A child. Hearing her mother yell or being attacked by a stranger. Unable to defend herself. She wanted to pull at her hair, pick at her skin, take control of the unnatural fear coursing through her. She hadn't hurt herself like that in years, but she didn't have Tom, and at least one of the cats standing in the space he usually occupied seemed to be judging her fiercely.

"You don't have to tell me," Tabitha said, grappling for another way to corral the clawed monster inside her soul. "I know that was my fault. I should have done more to stop that witch before she had the chance to meet those children." There. She had named her shame and fear, and that alone seemed to help. At least the emotions inside her had been acknowledged and given more defined boundaries instead of staying a shadowed beast. "I suppose I didn't see her death as right, since I was the only one threatened."

The faerie cat stared ahead at the trees while she answered. “Were the children wrong to defend themselves as they were the only ones threatened?”

“No,” Tabitha said with a sigh. “They weren’t wrong.” Of course they weren’t wrong, but Tabitha would have given anything to erase the haunted looks from their faces.

The matron’s tales never seemed so horrible until you had to see them in the flesh.

“And if she never met those children?” the faerie cat pressed. “Why shouldn’t your wishes serve you alone?”

Because that would be a selfish thing. Because she wasn’t worthy. The thoughts came instantly, though Tabitha knew better than to say them out loud.

“I suppose I had so many people tell me I wasn’t worth as much as others, that I couldn’t help but believe that it was true. And perhaps I saw some nobility to it—thinking I could prove my worth or serve others more fully if I served myself less. But it seems there are some wishes I can’t grant without also granting a few for myself.”

She couldn’t protect others from pain without first removing that same pain from herself. She could wish for herself to be stronger, but not without believing she had the right to be strong.

Just like she couldn’t truly love Tom without trusting and respecting his love for her.

The faerie cat finally nodded and looked back up at her. “Do you know what wishes you want granted?”

Tabitha couldn’t see too far in the future, but she knew what she wanted right now.

And she thought she could finally give voice to the rest of the tangled emotions inside her soul. “I want to help Tom, and then I want to go home. I don’t want to be a princess, but I want to believe that I no longer belong on the same path as my mother, and it isn’t wrong for me to want something different than the life she offered me, even if I sometimes miss her something fierce.”

Chapter 16

I Have a Dream

Tabitha had no more desire to stay at the witch's cottage. Summoning all the belief and magic she had left, she appeared in the White Palace in the back of a crowd of what must have been servants and lesser fae. They paid little attention to her, as everyone was focused on the people in the banquet hall who must have been of higher rank. They all sat at a long table covered with food that could only be dreamed about.

Tom was already seated there by the Queen.

Tabitha wanted to go to him, but before she could take a single step, the Queen started to speak.

Humans were fragile creatures, and the Queen still had to watch her human carefully. She was preparing to announce the coming of Spring to the whole court, but he was only picking at his food. "Tam'lin. Darling, are you not happy with the feast?"

Tam'lin's hand was on a lock of his hair. One of the beads was missing. "I think I . . . I might have remembered something last night."

The Queen put down her goblet, almost purring with delight. She had hoped that was what happened. "Did you? Oh, what fun." It had been so long since Tam'lin had treated her with a story. She was tempted to keep it all to herself, but she was a generous queen. She clapped, calling for the attention of the rest of the table and

beyond. “Everyone, Tam’lin is going to tell us another story of the human lands.”

The lavish feast forgotten, the fae and faerie creatures gathered close at their queen’s command in a delicate tinkle of bangled feet and the soft whisper of wings.

Even a few of the animal servants came in from the hall.

Human stories were their favorite, and they especially liked the one Tam’lin told about the shoeless prince—a stubborn cat who refused to talk or wear boots like a proper faerie beast.

When everyone had gathered, Tam’lin hesitated. “Last night, I was out walking in the woods—just walking. But there was a woman. I thought I knew her.”

“Your sister? Another member of your family, perhaps?” the Queen asked, beckoning for him to continue. “In our realm, it is said that mortals can even connect with the spirits of the dead if their bond is strong enough.”

But he shook his head. “I don’t think she was dead, and she wasn’t my sister. She was . . . different. She called me by another name, and I wanted . . . and I felt . . .”

The Queen’s smile instantly dropped. She stood, swinging about to confront one of her seated guests. “Pan’dryn, what is this? You said he didn’t have a true love, that he could be mine and dream of me alone.”

The stag-horned and white-haired fae prince fumbled amongst the cushions they all sat on, almost crawling back like a crab. It wasn’t surprising. Despite his boldness, he was still young—an upstart eager to make a place for himself within the Queen’s court—and there were rumors that he had recently lost the support of a dedicated human holding. “He didn’t have a true love. I checked when I first met him. And then he was a cat— ”

“And you thought a cat couldn’t find true love? Is that what you found in all your dealings with both men and beasts?” Her voice scorched through the room. There might have been some actual heat behind it. She had no desire to shield away all her power as she realized how she had been manipulated. The Queen had been so desperate to fulfill the prophecy that would restore more magic to their realm and so enamored by her human she had ignored what should have been obvious.

Tam’lin might have never cared for her at all without this prince’s interference.

But now she would set it right. “You have underestimated your subjects, Pan’dryn. And you have underestimated me. That alone will lead to your ruin.”

The fae prince cowered in response, and the Queen turned back to Tam’lin.

She pressed her face into a smile so she didn’t frighten him. “Come here, my darling. Tell me of the girl you saw, and don’t be afraid.”

Simple confusion appeared on his face, more than any fear. “She wasn’t like you,” Tam’lin was quick to reassure the Fae Queen. “She was . . . smaller. Weaker. And sometimes she was afraid. But she would always smile for me, no matter what else was wrong. I heard her sing when there were only the cats to hear her. And when she would speak to me—”

“You see? There is nothing to worry about, my queen.” The fae prince on the floor finally found his voice. “He might have formed his own attachment to this girl, but how could it possibly be returned? I swear, he was a cat, and he had no connection to her before then.”

The Fae Queen kept her frown. There had been a human girl smuggled into the start of Spring’s Celebration that was said to have come from the Summer Princess. That had been a lie. But the girl had returned to her own realm, and the Queen had been

willing to forget the matter along with the other human children Tam'lin had released—assuming that he simply wanted to safeguard his favored position here. It was a spark of ingenuity and jealous affection she had even seen as sweet. But this was too much of a coincidence. “And why would he choose to form even a one-sided attachment to this girl if he agreed to your bargain as freely as you said he did?”

“It was a free bargain. He wished for the means to defeat an ogre who sent a plague to their lands. I gave it to him. I even allowed him to find and train his own replacement, fully compensating his kingdom for his loss. You know this is true. I cannot lie to you or anyone.”

Tam'lin frowned. “You broke our bargain, and your magic should be forfeit.”

He no longer seemed confused. He was determined. Focused. When had that happened?

“You become a white stag on the Wild Hunts when the rings are open,” Tam'lin continued. “My uncle, the former marquis, caught you and used a corrupted version of your power to start the plague. He even gave you my name because he hoped you would kill me—or at least remove me as the heir to the throne of Umbrae. But you wanted me as your pet instead—you gave me a part of your magic because you wanted me to hunt the marquis and free you by his death. I wanted the plague to end, so I agreed, but only if you agreed that no more harm should come to my family or my kingdom. But my uncle is my family—even if I never told you how we were related. Even if we both wanted him dead. You killed my uncle, and our bargain should be forfeit.”

Soft murmurs trickled through the fae at his pronouncement, and the Queen didn't even look at the fae prince this time. She couldn't.

She just pointed at the door.

“Leave me. Retire to your mother’s country until I can stand to see your face again.” She whirled to face the rest of her court. “All of you must leave me at once.”

The fae and their creatures all scattered. Dishes fell. Feathers and trinkets were left behind in their owners’ haste to retreat, but her human didn’t move. He rarely did anything unless the queen directly told him to, and she commanded his every movement when they were together.

But sometimes her attention was called elsewhere.

That was when he had walked and dreamed.

Once the hall was empty, Tam’lin still sat on his cushion and tried to make sense of everything that had passed. “Are you also angry with me, my queen?”

“Of course not, my darling.” Her voice was softer, but she brushed away a tear before it could form. She could see what had happened. Tam’lin’s heart had never been hers. Pan’dryn had merely made it seem that way. The fault lay with him, and perhaps herself for being foolish enough to believe him simply because it fit with what she had wanted to believe. “I could never be angry with you. The bargain you made with Pan’dryn was corrupted by his own deceit, and I have always known that you would leave me eventually. Humans are such fragile and delicate creatures. I should be grateful for the time we had together.” She stepped forward and cupped his face as if memorizing its shape.

Tam’lin tried to look at the ground. She lifted his chin up to face her, but it didn’t help.

His heart was far away from her.

The Queen let out a sigh in resignation. If things were as she now feared, then she

had already lost. The human heroes spoken of in the old tales could be troublesome to the fae, but the heroines were far worse. True love was one thing that even she couldn't fight.

"I cannot say if this counter-bond you made will be returned, but you will have your choice, my love. I cannot take it from you. I will not." She dropped his face, her words becoming as firm as steel. "And when you see this girl again, this is what you must do . . ."

Tabitha couldn't believe it. She had come all the way back to the Fae Queen's palace, determined to help Tom, but the Queen was letting him go, all on her own.

Tabitha moved out of the crowd, ready to meet Tom when he left the palace, but that was not who she found first. The fair-haired queen appeared before her. "I thought I would find you here. I think it's time the two of us spoke."

Chapter 17

Dreamer and Schemer

Tabitha wasn't even surprised when she looked down and saw that the faerie cat had abandoned her. The cat always said that she would leave if it came down to a fight between Tabitha and the Fae Queen. But if that was what this was—a fight—Tabitha was surprised that the Queen hadn't already struck. Instead, she just stood there. Tall. Regal. Unbending. Just as she had been in Tabitha's last dream of Tom.

And though Tabitha should have been too overcome by the Queen's presence to speak, instead it seemed as though she was far too overcome to remain silent. "I saw you before, but it wasn't your voice that I heard. You weren't the one who asked me to come."

The Queen's hard stare became more of a sneer and when she spoke, the sound of her voice only confirmed that she had not been the one to call Tabitha here. "Why would I have asked you to come? I did not know that you even existed before you had already invaded my realm. Though, now that you are here, I have no reason to allow you to leave."

The implication of those words filled Tabitha's heart with dread and a feral desire to flee, but she would not abandon Tom again. She just had to believe that the magic used to threaten her could also protect her. "Tom said you only took strays. It's your law."

"Yes," the Queen said furiously. "It's my law. My own. I cannot be seen to break it,

or I would lose the respect of those I rule. But now that everyone has seen that I was willing to let my human go, no one could blame me if he fails to find his so-called love and chooses to return to me in his grief.”

With all the Queen’s threats, Tabitha still found herself more outraged on Tom’s behalf than her own. But she didn’t think she was devaluing herself in that moment. Death might be preferable to a life ensnared by deceit. “So, you would lie to him?”

“Whatever words I choose to share with him will be true.”

The words would be true, but incomplete. It would still be a lie. The Fae Queen had no reason to care for Tabitha, so it still seemed useless to ask her to spare her. But the Queen should care for Tom. “You know what happens to humans if they stay here. He will die—”

“All humans die.”

“Yes. From illness. Old age. Perhaps even a blade. But if Tom dies because of something you did, would you not regret it?” The voice in Tabitha’s dreams that had called her here hadn’t been the Queen’s. Instead, it must have been a voice from the fates, or a voice so deeply repressed inside of Tabitha that she could no longer see it as her own, but it still seemed that there should be a way for the Queen to understand the necessity of Tabitha’s coming. “And if you must manipulate and deceive him to keep him . . . if you must keep him under you as a thrall. You will never respect him, and his love for you would never be true.”

The Queen was quiet for several moments after that, and her next words were more thoughtful. Almost mournful. “I am queen. There is no man—human or fae—who could possibly be my equal, but I did care for him. I fed him. I let him sleep most days. That’s what humans need, is it not?”

When Biscuit had her last litter of kittens, Bandit was the only one Tabitha had kept. The rest she gave away to eager village children who wanted cats of their own. She remembered one precocious young girl quizzing Tabitha on all the best ways to care for her new pet.

How long will they live? How much should they eat or sleep? Where were their favorite places to be scratched, and how did you know if they were happy?

And that is what she saw now, looking at the Fae Queen. The same innocence—slightly twisted. So sweet and dark all at once. She couldn't hate the Queen in the way she thought she should, but Tabitha knew Tom.

Even as a cat, he valued his freedom more than anything else. This gilded cage could never be what he wanted, and Tabitha was shamed that she had ever doubted that—even for a moment.

“I understand,” Tabitha said, and the words were true. Though she didn't understand all the magic and politics involved, Tabitha knew the Queen had also been manipulated by someone in her own family court. It was possible that she wouldn't have used Tom in the way she had if she had known the whole story. “You did the best you could and loved him in the way you thought was right. You were lied to as we were lied to, and you thought there was no better option for him. But now I am here. And if you care for him at all, you should want him to return home with me.”

When Archie had found the matron's prophetic story, he had said there would be a sacrifice involved. Tabitha had worried that meant the Fae Queen was planning to harm or discard Tom as part of their Spring Celebration. But could it have meant something else?

Releasing Tom would be a great sacrifice of another kind for the Queen, if only she were willing to let it take place.

Then there would be no reason for them to fight at all.

The Queen shook her head. “And would you love him as an equal? Or even as a prince and your superior? Or did you merely come here for your cat?”

“I came for my friend in whatever form he chooses to take.”

The Queen didn’t seem to believe her. In fact, she looked triumphant. “Well, I suppose we shall see about that—if your love for him is as true as you claim it is. There is ancient magic at play that I can’t break, even if I were so inclined.”

The words were final and vaguely threatening, but before Tabitha could ask what the Queen had meant, the fae waved a hand in dismissal, and everything went dark.

Chapter 18

In the Lap of Morpheus

Leopold Tamias Lynister.

It wasn't a summoning, but Leo heard the name as he walked the woods. Something was still trying to call him back to the palace and the life he lived before.

But that wasn't who he was anymore.

He was Leo, and he was Tom, and he was determined to follow his dream girl and find his path home.

When the Fae Queen had left, and Tabitha had been banished from her presence, the world around her had gone dark. Like the Queen had carried away all the light with her. Tabitha tightened her grip on her cat in surprise, and he mewed a protest. "It's all right," she said, just as much for her own benefit as for the cat. "We'll be all right."

Tabitha still didn't know if her words were true, but she refused to give into fear. She might not be able to find Tom, but Tom was looking for her too, wasn't he?

And if the Queen had removed her claim, then there had to be a way for Tabitha to invite Tom to come to her instead. She might still have some of her own magic, her own belief. Light crept into her vision again at the thought. She pictured one of the places where they met in their dreams, where the surreal beauty of the Fae Courts gave way to thorn trees with discolored bark and a variety of mortal imperfections.

“Tom,” she said as she sat on a fallen log, holding a fluffy gray cat and humming a familiar tune to comfort herself. “Please come.”

Then she heard his voice. “Tabitha. You’re here.”

Tom. She wanted to run to him at once, but he seemed so surprised. How much had he forgotten? She released the cat and stood, straightening her simple skirt. “I’ve been out here to see you several times. Do you remember?”

Tom frowned, showing his continued confusion and hesitancy.

The few steps between them could have been a thousand, the air too thick to cross.

She sighed. “I’m not surprised. When I saw you last, I still thought it might have been a dream.” She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out what was left inside. The missing bead. “But the new marquis, Archie, said I might be able to help you find your way home, and I would like to try. If you would let me . . .”

She reached out her right hand, her left still holding the bead, but Tom recoiled. “Why did you come?”

“Because you are my friend.” Surely he knew that at least.

He shook his head. “That isn’t enough. I can only be released if your love is true, and you could not have fallen in love with a cat.”

She lowered her hand, laughing. The errant sound stood in discord with the somberness of the moment, but with everything else going on, a girl falling in love with a cat seemed rather unremarkable. And a girl falling in love with an enchanted prince? With Tom? That should be the most natural thing in the world. “And why is that? I fall in love with cats quite frequently. They became my family after my human

family became lost to me. You know about that.”

Tom frowned, unsure. But then he looked at the fluffy gray cat at her feet, who seemed to blink in confirmation. That seemed to help.

He must remember being with her as a cat at least, and she could build on that.

“But I do understand that most of my cats are . . . simple,” Tabitha continued. “They stay with me for simple reasons, and we share a simple sort of bond. It was the only sort of bond I thought I could manage for a time. But you were never so simple, and you stayed with me anyway.”

That did it. At least Tom’s foot took another step toward her, a halting but involuntary force, and she smiled encouragingly. “So no, I did not know you as a prince or love you as a man when first we met, but I held some affection for you that grew in stages as I came to understand how magical and complex you are.” Perhaps not many girls could have fallen in love with someone they only knew as a cat, but it seemed impossible for Tabitha to avoid falling in love with Tom.

Tom paused. “You learned who I was when Archie told you.”

“Yes, though you might recall that it did not take me long to accept his words, and I have seen you in this form several times since then.”

He took another step. “In our dreams.”

“And in the painted memories of your family.” He had to remember his own family.

But the idea made him frown. “So you know . . . I was a prince, but I wasn’t always very good or noble. Even when I wanted to heal our kingdom, I did it out of pride.”

She shook her head. “Only pride? You loved your mother and others who were lost.”

This might have been an assumption on her part, but the words rang true.

He took another step, and Tabitha couldn’t help but smile over his small efforts. It seemed that they were rebuilding his memories together piece by piece, step by step, like assisting a child learning to walk, but perhaps that was what he needed to restore what he lost. And perhaps she could help him build another name and identity for himself that even the Fae Queen couldn’t touch.

“And when you helped Archie, when you helped me, was that always out of pride?”

“Some of it was . . . with Archie.” But that made Tom smile. And Tabitha loved that smug smirk because she knew it was Tom’s own.

“And with me?”

Tom didn’t answer; the strength of his denial was so great.

She could feel it with the sound of two hearts beating as one.

“You are magical and complex,” she said, rippling with satisfaction. “You were never only one thing, and the man I see now, I desire. I understand we still have a lot to learn about each other, and it could be that my love isn’t strong enough, but it’s more than strong enough for me to want to try.”

He closed the distance between them with a final, eager step. “You are brave. You are strong. You always help things become more beautiful than they are, and in my dreams . . . even with all the magic here . . . I always wanted to return and stay with you.”

She reached out her hand, now only a few inches from his. “Will you let me take you home?”

His fingers fluttered in agreement, but he resisted for another moment. “You must hold on to me. The magic—it might not want to let me go.”

Tabitha nodded. She knew the Queen would not have made it easy. “Hold on to me, and I will hold on to you.”

Tom took her offered hand. She gave him a gentle squeeze before walking back toward the forest path and Castletown. He followed her step for step, picking around the forest underbrush, but then the gray cat standing by his feet made him pause.

His grip on her hand shifted, loosening, but Tabitha would not let go. He became a cat—a brown tabby. She scrambled to catch and support his back feet as he started to fall. She knew who he was and was determined to hold him, even if she was now carrying him in her arms.

“That’s the magic, isn’t it?” Tabitha said, reasoning that she should have expected such a thing. They were still under the magical influence of the Fae Realm, and Tom was still a cat in so many ways. “It doesn’t matter. If you want to be a cat, you can be a cat. I will take you home, regardless,” she told him, trying to believe that it was true. Being a cat would limit their relationship significantly, but Tabitha would still accept it if that was what he wanted.

They made it a few more steps, but even as Tom started to settle into her arms, the magic worked on him again.

He grew, becoming a lion larger than a bear.

Tabitha staggered. She trembled and buckled under his weight. Bandit fled from

them. A feral part of her wanted to flee as well. Tom was huge.

After leaving her first home with her mother, Tabitha had taken in dozens of strays that were simpler and weaker than her, loving them the best she could. Trying to love someone who might not need her, risking her heart to someone who could truly break it, was something new.

And in that way, she might have been too much like the Fae Queen, which could have led the Queen to believe Tabitha would fail this final test.

Calling herself unworthy wouldn't help him. She couldn't love Tom and flinch from him at the same time. She had known that Tom's pride made it difficult for him to accept her help. She had not realized that her fear and self-deprecation could be a similar barrier—perhaps even the opposite side of the same coin. But Tabitha wanted Tom to be as strong as he could be, and she had to trust that the same love she wanted to give him was what he wanted to give her in return—another dream she couldn't grant without granting a few of her own.

A dream that required two dreamers to meet as one.

Tabitha shifted her hold, moving her arms out from under his legs and on to his neck—his mane.

"It's all right," she said. "I don't need you to be small. You can be any size you choose—cat or prince or king of beasts. You will still be my Tom and my Leo. And if I can't carry you, then you will carry me." She climbed onto his back, pretending that she had always belonged there.

She did belong there. Tom seemed happy to carry her. He wanted their bond to continue, and so did she. Even Bandit returned to walking at their side.

Tom continued a few more steps, looking at his front paws as they crushed through the forest loam. She giggled when his form shifted again, becoming some kind of ape.

Tom looked like he wanted to laugh too. And it was such a relief to know with sudden certainty that while the love between them might still be new and blindingly difficult, their foundational friendship was still as simple as simple could be.

They could do this. They were getting so close.

The process continued. Tom became cats of every size. He became a bull, a rat, and for one bizarre moment, a waddling bird with black-and-white feathers. Sometimes, he was small, and Tabitha carried him. Sometimes, he was large, and he carried her.

And they left the forest as two humans, a man and a woman, holding hands together.

Chapter 19

Mirage

The two realms touched in more places than the humans seemed to realize. In shadows, dreams, and anything that could carry a reflection. The Fae Queen silently watched as all of Umbrae seemed to gather to cheer the joining of their princess with her Ogre-Slaying Champion, the castle's courtyard bedecked with the royal silver fox and a yellow lion. There were even a few flags that showed a silver panther in a field of black, a combination of the two houses since the princess held a higher rank than her husband and he would be taking her name.

But while all the humans had their eyes on the new royal couple, the Queen only had eyes for her human. She had watched his return to the Mortal Realm, as he separated from the human girl and wore a hood to attend his sister's wedding.

Then, as if the act had planted the idea in his head, her human took a ring his sister offered him and used it to marry his own true love before a single night had passed.

After they sealed this union with a kiss, the Queen looked away from the mirror in her dressing room. She felt the eyes of another creature behind her. Cats truly were a nuisance. Even the ones in the human kingdoms could simply choose to ignore any ward or glamour.

“Don't think for a moment that I have forgotten about you.”

The faerie beast gave a delicate sniff. “And do you wish to punish me as well, my

queen?”

“You would deserve it if I did,” the Fae Queen said, finally turning away from the mirror. “Bringing that human here behind my back.” Watching Tam’lin marry another girl would have been painful in any circumstance, but she had also had to watch him completely transform into someone she didn’t recognize. The green in his hazel eyes brightened as he laughed with a lightness the Queen had never seen from him. He was shrewd. Clever. Even sarcastic. Nothing like the simple and innocent thrall she thought she knew.

She hadn’t just lost him; her Tam’lin had never existed in the first place.

And the Queen had no understanding of the girl he had chosen, one who had risked everything to rescue a prince, only to throw away her chance to be a princess and a queen with both hands. A fae would never be so foolish.

And that foolish sort of love had foiled and eluded her more times than she cared to admit, causing chaos in the courts and depleting their magic in a way that made the Queen far too desperate.

The silver-tipped cat was standing on her hind legs, wearing a sapphire gown and high-heel boots that she probably thought gave her a more imposing look. It did not, but her words still cut like blades. “I will not apologize. Not when the results of Pan’dryn’s scheming could have been disastrous if the truth had come out some other way. You were being far too reckless, trying to force a prophecy you didn’t fully understand, and you should be thanking me.”

The Fae Queen scowled darkly. If she had been a younger and less experienced fae, her natural powers over the sun would have burned the insolent creature where she stood. “I am not thanking you. I am banishing you to the human realm. And since you love that human girl so much, you shall be her guardian until the end of her days.

Then your children shall continue to guard her children and so on until the end of time.”

The cat didn’t blink, even though the Fae Queen’s geas would be perfectly binding. “What is a mortal lifetime to me? What are a few short dalliances and kits shared with my feral cousins? Is that truly your idea of a punishment?”

It was a practical punishment. Someone had to guard the humans after all they did to anger Pan’dryn. Someone had to guard Tam’lin. The Fae Queen might not be capable of the kind of love two humans could share, but she still loved him in her own way.

And she could not seem to get it to stop, even after he was gone.

But if the cat was complaining . . . “I could give you a harsher punishment if you prefer.”

“No . . .” the cat said softly. “But I notice you didn’t tell him.”

The Fae Queen put a defensive hand over her stomach, far too aware of what the cat must be referring to. Nothing could stop the coming of Spring. “And you shall be forbidden from telling him as well.” No one should tell him. If they did, he might risk coming back to the Fae Realm after all she had done to free him. And if he discovered the truth and still didn’t want to return, well, perhaps she wouldn’t blame him, but she would rather he continue in ignorance than allow him the chance to reject the coming Spring. “It is better that way. I can raise the child as I have raised all her sisters.”

That statement just made the cat scoff more. “You raised her sisters to be fae. And that is what they are. Scheming, preening, self-interested fae. Do you know how to raise a human?”

How dare this creature speak to her so, like the cat had read the deepest fears of her heart. The ones that she had no solutions for and no desire to dwell on any further. “That is no longer your concern. You will not be here to see it. You will attend to your duty and leave me at once.”

The Fae Queen waved her arm and dismissed the cat.

No one could stop the coming of Spring, the one prophesied to bring new growth to their magic, but her child’s human family would be protected for the rest of their mortal days.

That was truly the last thing she could do for them.

Chapter 20

Sweet Dreams

“Tabitha? Are you here, dear?” Lady Sabine’s voice carried through the shop and up to the loft where Tabitha was still in her cot—even with the sun shining through the cracks of the shuttered window. How late had she slept? She tried to untangle herself from the blankets, but a pair of arms held her back.

A man lay beside her, his hair untied and covering half his face. “Too early,” he groaned, still refusing to open his eyes or surrender his grip on his bedmate. Tom. Leo. Her husband, though they were both fully dressed outside of removing their boots and top layers of winter clothing.

If she remembered correctly, they had both been a bit shy about their new arrangement and had done nothing but hold and kiss each other even after she had taken his ring and stood for the matrons and local magistrate to approve the union.

And it was just as well because she couldn’t quite believe they were married at all.

They had returned to Castletown on the same night as the royal wedding, and naturally, Tom had seemed eager to attend—at least covertly as a hooded member of the open crowd the princess and her ogre-slayer had gathered. But Tabitha had refused to go with him. Her aversion to crowds and the kings’ men had not abated; she had no desire to be a princess, but more than that, she had promised herself that once she brought Tom home, she would allow him full freedom to choose what his new life would look like.

He had to have the chance to make that choice without her.

She had forced herself to watch him walk away, even though it had been pure agony.

But during those few hours of separation, she had become certain that if Tom chose to leave the castle and return to her, then she would want him by her side—always. And, yes, she should have known her prince would be far too noble to agree to something like that without a legal wedding, but to come home carrying a ring, declaring his twin desire to disavow his former title and marry Tabitha before a single night had passed?

Tabitha had a great imagination, but it was far more than she had ever dreamed.

“Tabitha?” Lady Sabine tried again.

“Stay,” Tom said, even as he surrendered his weak grip on her middle. “Maybe she’ll go away.”

Lazy cat. Even in human form, some things never changed. She shook her head but gave him a fond smile. “I’m sorry, your highness, but normal shopkeepers can’t afford to turn their best patrons away. It will only take a moment.”

“Fine,” Tom said, rolling over in defeat. “You may go.”

Oh, may she? He was a former cat, a former prince, but she couldn’t let that pass. They were married. She pushed off the cot and sank deeply into an exaggerated curtsy. “Thank you, your royal grumpiness.”

He didn’t move, still showing her his back, but gave a low rumble of approval, almost like a purr. “Cheeky minx.”

Tabitha smiled as she straightened her dress and tiptoed around her cats to the loft's ladder. "Lady Sabine," she said in greeting as she started to climb down. "How was the princess's wedding? Was the dress to your liking?"

The lady and her maid had already made themselves at home in the shop, laying out a whole line of dresses on the till. "It was perfect. I got so many compliments. And Lord Declan! That rogue!" She made a show of delighted horror over whatever scandalous thing her new admirer had done before continuing. "You must redo all my dresses. Everyone wants a bit more color for the coming spring—it's a new age with our new prince and princess and everything back the way it should be." That was when Tabitha reached the ground floor, and Sabine looked up from her dresses. But the lady only spared a glance at Tabitha before focusing on another figure at the top of the loft ladder. "Prince Leopold?"

His hair still untied and his shirt untucked, Tom gave the lady a tired and resigned sort of smile. "Hi, Sabine."

"But you're—and why?"

He shrugged in a lazy and somehow noble way that seemed to say that his actions shouldn't be questioned. He slid down the ladder, skipping over several rungs with a fluid grace, to stand behind Tabitha before she could do anything but stare.

Perhaps she should have warned him to stay hidden. Perhaps he had not realized he would be recognized so easily, but now that he was caught, he had no issue flaunting himself.

"Well, weren't you just saying how talented my wife is? Why shouldn't I have claimed her as my own?" He put his arm around her with his easy sort of pride. "You know I always had a thing for fashion, and I can't have any of you thinking you discovered her talent before me. Now why don't you settle your business and be on

your way? We're newly married and have plenty of our own business to attend to."

Light, that was bold. They had only shared a chaste night together, but at the thought of the "business" of most newly wedded couples, Tabitha felt the heat rising on her cheeks just the same.

Having Tom here, hearing him speak . . . Well, she was still getting used to it.

Tom the cat had been simpler. More predictable.

Tom the human seemed liable to light her world on fire, and it thrilled and terrified her in equal measure. Even Lady Sabine took the pointed hint. "Yes, yes, of course your highness." She gave a startled sort of bow and stumbled over herself to finish her orders quickly. But by the sly looks she kept exchanging with her maid, she was thrilled with the new piece of gossip she had discovered.

No doubt about it, the whole of Castletown would know of the missing prince's whereabouts before the day was over.

"Sorry," Tabitha said to Tom once the lady and her maid had departed. She still wasn't sure if Tom had initially intended to be recognized. "I should have warned you—your sister has been sending me noble clients." He had been missing for seven years. A client from the village might not have recognized him right away. But a noble client with her mind stuck on the royal wedding she had just attended?

Impossible.

Tom rubbed the stubble on his chin, still completely unbothered. "Makes sense. But it doesn't matter. Someone would have found out eventually."

That was true enough. Tom had used his legal name in the wedding ceremony, and he

had gone to the castle to see his sister's wedding before returning with the ring. They couldn't have kept him hidden in the loft forever, and it really had been only a matter of time before news of his reappearance spread, but how were they to manage it?

They couldn't live a life separate from the castle if the persistent crowds came to follow them here.

"We could move," Tabitha offered. "Go to one of the other Borderland Kingdoms where you won't be so easily recognized."

Tom shook his head. "This is your shop, Tabs. I could never ask you to give it up for me."

"Why not? You gave up a castle for me." And in that light, any protest either of them might make seemed patently absurd. "It's just a building, and I'll still have all the same skills I had before. We can establish another shop wherever we end up."

Tom frowned. "It wasn't just for you. You know that, right? I wasn't always a good person as a prince, and after everything . . . I want a new start just as much as anything else."

Tabitha nodded, marking the subtle pain in his expression. She didn't know exactly how much he remembered from the Fae Realm, but whatever scars he carried might not be so easily mended. It was something she could understand perfectly.

This was the life they both decided they wanted right now, and they would have to rebuild things together at their own pace. No one should expect him to want the same things he wanted when he was younger, but truly, he hadn't just given up a crown for her.

He had given up everything. "And your family? How did they respond?"

“Father . . . Well, I think he still thought he was looking at a ghost, so he didn’t say much. But Ainsley was the one to give me the ring from our mother’s collection, even before I said I intended to marry you, so I imagine she approves.”

“Your sister gave you the ring?” Tabitha looked at the ring again—a cat’s eye with diamonds. She loved it from the first, and now she knew for certain what gift she wanted to give her husband in return, before they sold the shop and left Castletown behind.

Chapter 21

A Dream Come True

Tabitha held Bandit and stared down at the castle as she prepared herself to brave its walls. Black and silver guards were everywhere, but there was no avoiding it. The princess and her ogre-slayer would not have returned to Carabus after the wedding last night, and she could not wait another moment before seeing them.

She had put this off long enough.

But when she looked down at her feet again, daring herself to move, she saw that a silver-tipped cat had joined her. “Fayette?”

The cat raised her chin and gave a dismissive sniff. “I told you that wasn’t my name . . . but I suppose that you must call me something if I am to stay here.”

“Stay here?” Why would the cat want to stay here?

“It is the Fae Queen’s orders. I am banished to this realm for however long you and your prince decide to live.”

Tabitha winced. “The Queen is angry at you then?” She couldn’t feel guilty for saving Tom, but she didn’t mean for the cat to carry the burden of her actions.

“Yes, but that isn’t really the reason she sent me. I am to be your protection from fae princes or any other faerie creatures who might seek to do you harm, though she did

not say that I should have to work for free.”

Another bargain then. It was only fair, and Tabitha had noticed Fayette had come without any of her former clothing. “What do you want? Another dress? Though, I suppose you’ve realized that cats don’t often wear clothing here.”

“Yes, but they do get head scratches.”

Tabitha blinked in surprise. “You want me to scratch your head?”

“Behind both ears, if you please,” Fayette said patiently, waiting until Tabitha freed one of her hands to comply. “You will also provide for my food and waste removal as per the normal contract.”

“Contract?”

“The one that makes you my human. You signed one for him, didn’t you?” Fayette looked back at Bandit. “Or were you compelled to join his service by his looks alone?”

Tabitha didn’t know how to answer that. She certainly couldn’t argue against the logical absurdity, and somehow that made her feel a bit braver than she had been before.

Like she was in another dream with endless magic at her fingertips.

She squared her shoulders and looked at the castle again. “I think I’m ready to go in.”

Fayette nodded. “And we shall be right behind you.”

Tabitha thought she was navigating the castle and its steady maze of guards, servants,

and footmen in their silver and black livery well enough until the last guard had her wait in one of the princess's receiving parlors. That's when she noticed the guard at the door had a faded scar, three thin white lines standing out from against his bearded face. Her heart wanted to race in reflex, but it had been racing this whole time. She had seen scars like that enough to know where they came from.

She wanted to say something, but her throat stayed dry as the desert, and it remained firmly closed until the guard turned away to hold the door open again. A flood of ruffled fabric bustled in, enhancing every movement made by the energetic princess. "Tabitha? Is everything all right? Where is Leo? Or should we all call him Tom now? I always liked it." She glanced around the room again like she thought her brother might be hiding somewhere.

Perhaps she didn't believe Tabitha would come on her own.

Tabitha could scarcely believe it either, but she tried to explain.

"Tom is . . . He's at home. He doesn't know I came." Tabitha put down Bandit to reach for her ring instead. "But you know I married him? Part of the reason he resigned his title was so we could be together. Does it make you angry?"

The princess tilted her head like such a thought had never occurred to her. "How could I be angry? I might still miss that ridiculous popinjay occasionally, but I searched for my brother for seven years because I wanted to see him happy again, not so I could trap him here as a prince without his heart and soul. He wants to be with you."

Still, Tabitha felt compelled to confess something more. "I know I could have come here to be with him instead, that you would have accepted me from the first, but I could never be a princess or live in a castle. I want to sew. I want to travel. I think I could keep learning to be braver than I ever used to be, but all of this . . ." She

glanced about the room that couldn't be the largest the castle had to offer. "This could never be the life for me. But you have all been so very kind that I wanted to explain, even if it's hard for me."

"Oh, Tabitha." The princess reached for Tabitha before holding herself back, taking ahold of her skirts instead. "You don't have to explain. Please—take my brother and travel the kingdoms. Just promise me that you'll both be as happy as two people can be."

"Tabitha?" another voice called, and Tabitha winced. She thought she had left Tom with enough to do about the shop not to notice her absence, but here he was.

And the princess looked positively gleeful at the development. "Oh, would you look at that? You made the poor boy sick with worry. Come on in, Tom. I promise we haven't hurt her."

"Perhaps not," Tom said, walking the rest of the way to stand by her side. "But, Tabs, you know you don't have to do this. We already decided I wasn't going to be a prince." He actually seemed cross about it, and Tabitha would have deserved it too—if she had truly tried to make him a prince again without his consent.

That wasn't what she was here for, but perhaps she still should have told him. It had just taken so much to build up her courage that she had been worried she might lose it if she stopped and explained. Being married and successfully blending her life with someone else might still take some getting used to.

"Yes," Tabitha agreed. "We decided you wouldn't be a prince. And I am no princess. Still, you should be able to have your family, and I thought . . ." Tabitha hesitated, but she had spent more than enough time dreaming. She needed to speak her wish if she ever hoped to have it come true. She turned to face the princess dead-on. "Well, I don't have much of a family of my own, and I thought I might very much want a

sister.”

Tom blinked his surprise, but Ainsley danced in her spot, still holding onto her skirts like that was all that was keeping her grounded. “You want me? Really?”

“Really.”

And then the princess’s hands burst free. “Oh, I am going to hug you now. There really is no stopping it.” Her arms engulfed Tabitha, but only briefly before she was gesturing for Tom and Archie—who had been standing outside the door—to join them. “Everyone, come in here. And you will visit us at least once a year and write to me about your travels, and I shall be the best sister you could ever wish for.”

“I can’t write. I never learned how,” Tabitha said, though it seemed rather silly now. Her mother hadn’t much time for any sort of literacy, but Granny Tailor would have taught her if she had been brave enough to admit the fault before the elderly woman’s eyesight had started to fail.

How many dreams had been denied to her simply because of her own fear? Dreams that she could have used to continue to bless everyone around her? It certainly seemed clear that denying her own wish for a family and holding Ainsley at a distance had hurt them both needlessly.

Her new sister broke off their hug to shrug the concern away. “Then Tom will write. He really will be quite useless otherwise.”

“True enough,” Tom agreed without a hint of shame. “Or at least, the trade I spent my former life preparing for is useless to me now. But you have a fine trade that I never would want you to give up. So if I’m to be your kept man for a while, the least I can do is write. I can teach you as time goes on, and you can teach me to help more around the shop, dividing things however we please.” He said it all as if it were the

most natural thing in the world, and perhaps it was.

That was how things always were in their dreams.

“It might not be the most traditional arrangement, but I never want you to doubt that you are the perfect match for me.”

More than perfect, it was everything Tabitha could have possibly wished for.

Except for maybe one thing. That guard was still standing at the door, and by his leering expression, Tabitha was certain she hadn’t mistaken who he was.

She looked to Tom. “All right. But before we leave, there is one last thing I need to tell you.”

“That you got another cat?” He looked down at Fayette with a wry smile as if he expected there would be many new cats in their future.

“No. That cat adopted me—per the usual contract. What I wanted to tell you . . .” Tabitha pointed with all the bravery she could muster—allowing herself to be a princess of the castle at least for one moment. “That man over there isn’t a good person, and I don’t want him anywhere near my new sister. Make him leave at once.”

Tabitha Brewer’s real life was far brighter than a mystical faerie land, now that she had learned to honor and fulfill her own dreams. After Tom and Archie had eagerly thrown Tabitha’s former attacker into a cell, she quickly gathered enough courage to visit the home where Granny Tailor was staying and tell her of their plans.

“Well, of course you have to sell the shop!” the elder woman said with a bit of a cackle. “You can’t just stuff the Prince of Umbrae up in that loft with you and all those cats forever.” Then she winked back at Tom, and added, “Though Sam and I

somehow managed to have our first up there before we built the larger house together. The start of all our adventures. And that's all I wanted for you—a proper adventure and a chance to make a few of your dreams come true. The shop is only four walls, but your talent and heart will go with you wherever you go.”

Granny Tailor's speech had become more unguarded with age and left her eldest daughter blushing fiercely at the references to her own conception, but the whole family seemed supportive and determined to show their love for Tabitha in a proper send off—more than Tabitha might have been able to accept or even recognize before.

Han'sel and Gret'sel—now called merely Hans and Gerta—showed up the next week, while Tabitha and Tom were still cleaning and packing up the shop to sell.

Tabitha had worried, but Tom never minded any of the cats and seemed to take the new human additions to their family in stride. He only muttered about saving one of the nicer dresses from the shop for Gerta to wear and teaching Hans to use a bow “better than the useless miller boy,” in a way that made Tabitha certain that Tom would love them better than he would ever admit to.

He didn't even mind when Fayette started to speak without warning and without apology. “What? You married him, but I was never supposed to talk to him? And let me tell you, I have a lot to say.”

Their strange family built in tragedy was only growing larger and more beautiful.

It also made Tabitha, almost in spite of herself, reflect on what Granny Tailor had said again. There might not be much room in their cot, but that only made the question more pointed.

What about the possibility of consummating their marriage and growing their family

the more traditional way?

In the end, she had to ask Tom straight out and found that most of his initial hesitation had been on her behalf—not because of anything he had remembered from the Fae Realm. “I am not some pansy with womanly virtue to protect,” he had said as if the very question about his welfare had tweaked his stubborn pride. “The relationships I had there weren’t what I would have chosen, but I’d like to think that I found ways to use my position to my benefit.”

“Not just your benefit.” Tabitha wasn’t trying to argue with him; he would always be her stubborn cat and her noble prince in one. “You helped our children, and you helped me.”

Tom’s eyes turned more thoughtful at that. “I think I remember that. Those might have been some of my higher moments. There might have been some lower ones: moments where I truly felt I loved the Queen, and that she felt the same for me—in her own way at least. It was hard to sort out my own feelings in that place; there was a lot I didn’t understand, but I also believe there were many things that she did not understand. As such, I still cannot think of her in the same way that I think of that man who attacked you. She did right in the end, and I wish her well, even if I am glad to be free of her.” He paused, turning back to Tabitha. “Is that hard for you to hear?”

“No. I feel the same.” It was what she had thought herself in her only meeting with the Fae Queen. It was terrible to think that the Queen’s love had been manipulated by someone in her own family court, and Tabitha still found herself hoping that the woman would find something better. “I only wanted to be certain that our relationship not be built in the same way. I asked you to stay with me. I want you to stay with me, but if you felt rushed or obligated—”

“I do not feel obligated,” Tom said as if disgusted by the very idea. “I feel . . . I do not know how to describe it. Perhaps luckier than I have any right to be? I asked you

to marry me because I wanted to. There is no hesitation from me, but I would happily wait months, years, even forever for you to feel the same.”

Feel the same? Tabitha had laughed, watching the adorable confusion cross Tom’s face.

But in that moment, it all seemed so clear. Tom loved her, and she loved him. They would rather face a hundred deaths each than cause the other more pain or fear. As such, neither had been willing to reach out and take the greater happiness that was available to them, even if it was something they both wanted.

They could continue in this pattern forever if nothing was done.

Tabitha had once promised herself that she would not kiss Tom until she knew he was hers to keep. And that night, she reached for another one of her dreams, kissing his confusion away and welcoming her husband closer. Letting him know with her actions that she was ready to be his wife in truth, in all the things that words could never say.

Afterward, Tom asked her to cut his hair back to what it had been before and found a bow to wear on his back. Now that he was no longer a prince, he had started using the name Tom Forester, becoming a hunter again and effortlessly picking up all the parts of his old life that still seemed meaningful to him.

So much happened in a steady stream that Tabitha didn’t have much time to think about what she would be leaving behind. It hit her all at once as she stood, ready to close the door of the old shop for the final time. This was the first place she had truly felt at home, where she could sew and let her imagination go wild. This was where she and Tom had shared their first few weeks of marriage, eventually putting away enough of their old scars to come together as one.

But as pleasant as those memories were, the shop was not the dream it once was, and anything she might truly miss, they carried with them.

She turned to the cart where Tom, the two children, and the cats were all waiting. This was her family now. And perhaps one day there would also be a child in the spring that would match the one spoken of in the matron's prophecy—and that would be another dream come true.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:04 am

“ A gain! Again!” the Spring Princess cried, just as the story had concluded. She stood from her bed in a ribboned night dress.

Her mother, the Queen of all the Fae, hesitated. “Are you sure? You know there are other stories I could tell you.”

“No. I want my father’s story,” Spring insisted, her blue-green eyes sparkling under her strawberry blonde locks. She shifted the small gray and white kitten in her arms to emphasize her point—a gift from the last time the faerie cat had reported to the Queen. “I want the cat without boots, and the prince without a soul! It’s the one I love the best-est.”

That certainly seemed to be true. Humans were so fragile that the Queen could never leave her staff to care for Spring as she had with her elder daughters.

She had to make sure the girl ate and slept and wasn’t harassed by other fae.

As such, the Queen had been there every time Spring requested more stories of her father.

It was enough to make her wonder. “Then are you angry with me, child? That we must be separated?”

“No,” the girl said with a sudden thoughtfulness that made her seem much older than she was. “Da wasn’t happy here. You had to let him go because you are the best-est queen. You don’t want anyone to be unhappy, even if they are human. Even if it makes you cry.”

The best-est queen? The Queen shook her head.

The two realms touched in more places than the humans seemed to realize. In shadows, dreams, and anything that could carry a reflection. As such, the Queen could tell her daughter much about the humans, even if they wouldn't see her in return, but she really wasn't any good at telling stories. None of the fae were, as they could only speak the truth. That was a gift of the humans, twisting their words to fit the needs of the tale.

And with it came another gift.

Humans often lied, but there were times when they said or even just thought something that wasn't quite true but had some real belief behind it. And that was when the Queen could feel the magic around her building most acutely, twisting up every part of her being to will that thing into existence.

She might never have been the "best-est queen" as her daughter had described it, but that was what she was determined to become to please this child.

Who could have imagined such a thing?

The girl was petting her cat again, considering. "But that threadwitch he married . . . She is like me. She was human, but she was like a faerie too, wasn't she? The way she could make other people's dreams come true?"

"Perhaps." The Queen reluctantly saw the connection.

Spring smiled contentedly. "And Da loves her, so he will love me too, when I go to see them. They both will."

"You are so certain." It was the only truth the Queen could speak out loud.

Spring nodded, playing with her kitten's paws again. "They love cats, and so do I," she said with more of a sing-song voice, even briefly giving herself whiskers.

There didn't appear to be any hope to talk her out of it. "Perhaps you are right, but it is not a journey I could make with you. As such, you must promise me that you will not attempt it too soon."

"I won't," Spring said, but then she seemed to remember her fae blood—all the powers that would bring new life to the Fae Realm and might one day make her queen. She seized on the opportunity to make a bargain. "But only if you tell me the story again."

The End

A royal Selection Ball. A doomed romance. He's not exactly a prince, but then, she's not entirely human . . . Find out what happens when the Spring Princess travels to the Mortal Realm in the start of a new sequel series, *The Swan Bride* .

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:04 am

A royal Selection Ball. A doomed romance. He's not exactly a prince, but then, she's not entirely human . . .

Leda happily shifts between two different forms and two different worlds, living as a magical fae creature called a swan maiden. But when a sorcerer steals her feather cloak, she is stuck as a human until it is returned. Cut off from her former magic, her only hope is to persuade a reluctant prince to declare his love and battle the sorcerer on her behalf.

Navigating the human world is hard. Navigating the prince's Selection Ball is even harder. The prince's enigmatic half-brother promises to help her gain the prince's favor, but soon, Leda finds herself torn between them.

Will Leda find her true home at last? Or will her fractured magic release an even greater horror?

is a clean romantic and comedic fantasy inspired by Swan Lake and other Fairytales.

This book one of a series of interconnected standalone novels. Each new story takes inspiration from a different fairytale couple as the human kingdoms become more entangled with the Fae Courts just outside their borders.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:04 am

A basilisk was a creature born in the wrong nest. Like a chicken egg hatched by a toad or a snake. Leda could understand that—being in the wrong nest. A part of two worlds, never truly belonging to either. After all, Leda couldn't say if she had been born or hatched.

She lived forever as a swan maiden, taking one form and then the next.

Until the day she left off bathing in her human form and found her feather cloak missing. And she cursed in a way not fitting for either a swan or a maiden. Losing her cloak wasn't the same as losing a hairbrush. She could never be a swan again without it.

All right, settle down, Leda told her racing heart. There was no reason to panic yet. It was a big lake. And with the warmth of the summer sun, she had been lounging in the water for hours. She could have just misplaced the cloak—forgotten which side of the willow tree she had laid it.

If I retrace my steps . . . Leda walked from one moss-covered boulder to the next.

No feather cloak.

Leda searched the cattails and lily pads, even following a few of her half-formed footprints in the muddy bank.

No feather cloak.

Leda splashed the water and startled a family of ducks.

No. Feather. Cloak.

Leda's breath came out in shorter and more frantic gasps. The forest lake blurred in her vision to become a meaningless mix of blue and mossy green. She pulled at her hair, stretching the tight curls between her fingers before letting them spring back toward her scalp.

Was she allowed to panic now?

“Are you looking for this, my pet?” The male voice came from behind the great willow tree, unnaturally dry and unaffected. Leda turned to see a man who certainly hadn't been there before. She would have seen him. She would have remembered him. He had a receding crop of graying hair that fell near to his shoulders, piercing dark eyes, and a hook-like nose. Long limbs poked out of his doublet and cape, fingernails digging like talons into the white feathers of her beloved cloak. He honestly looked more birdlike than she currently did.

And he was watching her run around naked.

Well, she was always naked. Swans didn't wear clothing. That would be ridiculous. But it felt different when she was human and featherless. Her sun-streaked curls, medium-brown curves, and even a smattering of summer freckles were fully on display.

She ducked into the cattails and held out a not-so-hopeful hand. “Yes.” Her voice came out too fast and sharp. As a swan, she was dignified. Graceful. Her human form made her weak.

She took a breath and fought for her normal cadence. “Yes, my lord. I am missing my cloak, as it happens. I don't suppose you will give it back.” It should have been a question, but it wasn't. She knew what happened when a mortal man found the cloak of a swan maiden.

They never gave it back.

She waited for the man to demand her hand in marriage, or at least a carnal marriage, but he made a sweeping motion with his cape like a shrug.

“I thought about keeping it, but then, what use would I have for a swan?”

To be caught outside the lake without her feathers by a hotblooded male should have been the thing of nightmares. But that was a nightmare Leda understood. One she expected.

To have a man look not at her but through her. To see nothing but indifference in his gaze.

That was a nightmare of a different kind.

Her heart hastened into an undignified gallop, now desperate to agree with anything the man said if it meant she could retake her wings and fly far away from here. “It’s true, my lord. I don’t imagine you would find a swan very useful at all.”

“Indeed.” The man paused as if to give more weight to the word. “I’ve seen you out here before. I could have come and taken this earlier,” he said, passing her cloak from one hand to the other as he spoke. “I certainly thought about it. But you see, I happen to be a very clever man, and try as I might, I have only thought of one use for you. Bait. Fetch me a prince—a human prince mind you, and I will return your coat.”

He tossed something back at her.

The flash of white made her heart soar, but only for a moment. It wasn’t her feather cloak. Her cloak was gone—transformed or perhaps replaced in a sleight-of-hand movement she hadn’t tracked. Instead, she caught a thin linen shift, several years out of fashion and meant for a serving woman to wear, perhaps under another bodice or

outer dress.

She would still be running around frightfully underdressed, but she quickly pulled it over her head and tried to find a more dignified stance. She would find a way to reason with this man. She had to. “A . . . prince? And how am I to fetch one of those?”

The man’s eyes roamed up and down her figure again, even with the shift in place. Dismissive. Blood-chilling. “You’re a swan maiden. A fae. Your kind might not be known for your intelligence, but I’m certain you will think of a way.”

Leda frowned, but she couldn’t deny the truth of his assessment. Swans were grace and beauty. Counted as lesser fae in their own courts but still highly prized amongst the humans. If caught in their weaker, featherless forms, they were enchanting and biddable maidens that any man (or prince) should wish to make his own.

She had no reason to be intelligent.

“And after I fetch him . . . how should I find you? What is your name?” She should have asked that first. After all, she had known from the beginning that this man would become her new husband or her new jailor. More likely a mixture of both. The fact that he had chosen the latter option without the former—honestly, it was a bit of a relief.

Swans lived freely for as long as they could, until falling resignedly into a mortal man’s grasp. Any true show of resistance might be useless, going against her very nature as a swan, but she did not want to be married to this cold-blooded fish. Not civilly or carnally or any other way that could possibly be imagined.

“Leander Rothbart is my name,” he said. “You will find that most men know it.” His hook-of-a-nose tilted back toward the forest path. The dirt road led past the great willow tree and on to the local baron’s castle keep. The gray-stone towers peeked

through the greenery and likely gave their occupants full view of the lake as well.

True and complete names were a special kind of magic. Higher fae often used the names of mortals to bind them to a spell (and the old stories held plenty of examples of the reverse, where a human had caught a fae in a similar trap), but even with her cloak, Leda had never been that powerful. She could only guess at the man's importance.

"You are kin to the baron?" she asked, proud of herself for remembering that the human baron was a much older man who had presided over the recent wedding of one of her swan sisters.

The man scowled and puffed himself up like he had feathers. "I am the baron of these lands and a mighty sorcerer."

"You are a sorcerer?" Perhaps it should have been obvious. She had heard all the old stories shared between the fae at seasonal gatherings and revelries. He might not be showing any sign of magic currently, but he had the caped robes, the ominous presence—he even lived in a castle with several high towers.

And there was the sudden disappearance of her feather cloak to consider.

Of course he was a sorcerer, and if she had more magic and cunning than a featherless swan, she might have seen it at once.

But Leda still wanted to deny it, the very thought summoning another chill.

Human wizards tinkered with existing magic, but sorcerers were different, making devilish pacts to take on themselves the wild magic of the Darkwood. That sort of magic was natural to the fae but unnatural to humans. It twisted them up inside.

This man had a twisted and damaged soul.

He bowed his head. “That is why most men know my name.”

“And when I fetch you a prince—”

“A human prince,” Rothbart reminded her.

“A human prince,” Leda agreed. “What use will you have for him?”

He re-straightened his robes, his eyes on the willow tree. “Well, as I said, I don’t have much use for a swan. So, if I’m being perfectly frank, as I always strive to be, I hope he breaks your heart.”

A royal Selection Ball. A doomed romance. He’s not exactly a prince, but then, she’s not entirely human . . . Read more of Leda’s story in *The Swan Bride* .