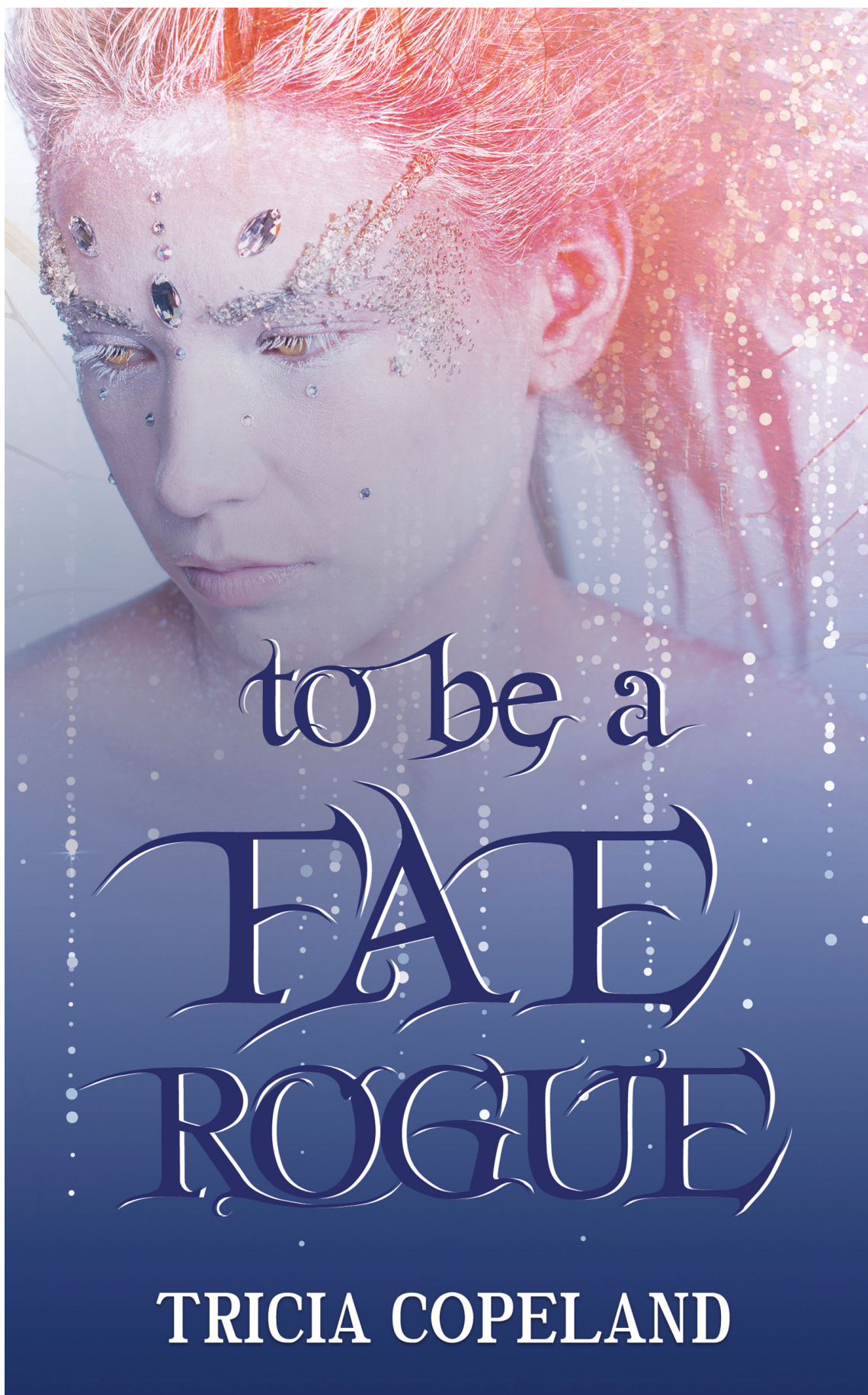




to be a
FAE
ROGUE

TRICIA COPELAND

to be a Fae Rogue
by Tricia Copeland

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Chapter I



HOOD LOW OVER MY FOREHEAD, I peer across the meadow as the last light of day basks my castle in orange. I watch the windows as, one by one, lights spring forth as someone within ignites the torches in the passageways. Trying to identify the forms passing the glass panes, I squint, eager for any glimpse of my family. A gale sweeps through the trees, and I hug my cloak to my middle.

“I do not often see anyone in these woods.”

I jump at the sound of Grant’s voice and fight the instinct to spin to face him. Heart pounding, I assess my options. My Fae at Arms, or former Fae at Arms, will know my voice.

“I love how the castle looks as the last light graces it.” I raise my tone an octave, praying he will not recognize me.

“Odd that I have not seen you here before.”

“Perhaps I blend into the landscape well then. I come here to be alone and think.”

“You should not be in the forest after dark. Even The Queen’s Wood shelters danger.”

The Queen’s Wood? They have named my forest The Queen’s Wood? My anxiety at being found mixes with longing.

“It is nice she is honored in this way,” I say.

“Did you know the Queen?”

Leaves rustle behind me, and I glance down, catching sight of his boot. “I have only seen her in the village with her cousins.”

“You live in the village? I can escort you home.” I feel the heat from his body as he approaches.

“No.” I tug the sides of my hood over my cheeks. “As I said, I come here often. I will be fine.”

“As you wish.” The ground crunches, and the air behind me cools.

I tuck my chin to my chest and wait. I catch sight of him exiting the forest and crossing the meadow. As he enters the orchard, his form disappears behind the tree trunks. I jump into the air and weave through the trees. Heart in my throat, I descend to my porch, boots thudding onto the wood planks. That had been too close.

Inhaling, I enter the cabin.

“That sounded like a hard landing,” Nicholas, one of my most trusted guards from the palace, says.

I shed my cloak and hang it beside the door. “I saw Grant in the wood, The Queen’s Wood. Why have I not been told they named my forest?”

“You spoke with Grant?” Adam, another trusted guard from my palace, jumps up.

“Yes, he found me. He did not see my face, and I tried to alter my pitch. That is not the point.” I raise my hands to my hips.

“We did not wish to cause you further strife, and you should not torture yourself by going there. What if you were recognized? What would you do then?”

“I know, I know.” Pulling the chair from the table, I slump into the seat opposite my ward. I lift my eyes to meet his. “Were you nice to Adam and Nicholas?”

“Yes, I was nice to my babysitters.” Theron, in his fae form, rolls his eyes.

I lean forward. “We do not have babies in Middle Earth. We have younglings.”

Adam slides a book across the tabletop to me. “They say this is the last one.”

Lifting the thick text from the tabletop, I turn to the page marked with a leather strap. Lines connect names, Lilith to an unknown being, begetting the vampire lines. A second line, opposite the first, links Lilith to an unnamed archangel, creating the witch lines. Sonia’s name hovers under the witch lines. *Was she Lilith’s daughter?* Surely Sonia, former High Priestess of the witch lines, now transformed into an Archangel who resides in Sheol with Abaddon and Lucifer, could not be that old.

Recalling Sonia’s threat, I shudder. “*You’ve no idea who I am, who my parents are ... I will be reconciled, even if I have to move Heaven and Earth to do it. Next time a volcano erupts or an earthquake rumbles through the bedrock, you will be witnessing my reach.*”

The fated day above the desert echoes through my psyche. My death, the witches’ circumvention of my untimely passing to the afterlife, and the pledge I made scroll through my thoughts. *My reach will be limitless as well.* But here I am, a whole season later, with no clearer a picture of how to stop Sonia than the day I burned the page alerting me of her promise.

Adam and Lilith were set in the garden almost six thousand years ago. Witches’ lives span eight hundred to nine hundred years, but Sonia still lived and breathed in human form until the year 2018 AD, or CE, as the humans have adopted now. *What type of being could live six thousand years?* Only one of direct lineage from an immortal being, I could only guess. *Are we to surmise these Sonias are the same?* The fae only know of her activities from about the fifteenth century, when she became bolder with crusades against the vampires.

If the name on the page matches the same being as the Sonia we know, it only follows that she *must* be Lilith’s daughter, sired by the Archangel Michael. My brain spins with the magnitude of a life spanning six thousand years. I can barely comprehend the changes my life has seen in the last fifteen months. I was crowned queen, thwarted an attempted coup, and have prevailed over kobold, locusts, goblins, and ogres. I braved more passages to Lower Earth than I care to count. My power has become mine to yield. I have also survived a festival season and being courted by four princes—which may be the most impressive feat of

them all. I swallow, not wanting to think about my final act as Queen of Aubren.

My sacrifice could have been for naught if we cannot decipher Sonia's threat. I draw the page to me. Below Sonia's name sits the name of her son, then grandsons—one of these being Theron.

"Terran, that must be you. Your brothers' names are listed here." I press my finger to his former name on the page. "And you contend to not know the name of your grandfather, an aunt, uncle, or any other relative?"

Terran drops a bone on his plate. "I'm afraid no one ever mentioned it. This is your and my brothers' problem, not mine."

"This is the last text to be found. There is nothing more to be known. You are stuck in Middle Earth until your brother believes you are no longer a risk. Help us, and I imagine it will go a long way towards him forgiving you."

"I told you I'm willing to strike a deal. I'll talk after I'm released to Upper Earth."

Hearing a thud outside, my heartrate rises a notch. I push to my toes and look through a slit in the wood panel. Smiling, I swing the door open.

Foster takes my hands, tugging me outside and wrapping me in his arms. His clothes smell of fresh bread and ale, and I imagine he came from dinner with his men. As he releases me, I take in his blue eyes and orange locks, reflecting the light from the hearth. I could look upon him every day for the rest of my life, and I would be the happiest fae ever.

He leads me into the cabin, grunting at Terran, greeting Adam and Nicholas, and inquiring whether they can spare another hour.

"Anything for the Queen and her Chief of Spies." Nicholas winks.

"Nicholas, I am not your queen," I say.

"You will always be my queen. Now, go so I can beat Terran in another round of cards."

Lifting my cloak from the hook, Foster wraps it around my shoulders and raises the hood over my hair. He kisses the largest gem in the center of my forehead, and tiny tingles spread like fire over my skin. Heat rises to my cheeks.

"Can't you guys get a room?" Terran rises.

"We have a room." Foster extends his arm. "We are in a room."

"You peeps don't know anything."

"Yet another sentence that proves you need more time to adopt fae culture. You may never get beyond the confines of this forest, much less outside of Middle Earth, if you cannot adjust." I back to the door.

"Oh, I can pretend, fair Queen." Terran bends at the waist. "I can form sentences without contractions, and I will be happy to lie about how wonderful it is to play cards and stomp my foot to the tune of a fiddle."

Foster clutches my hand, urging me out of the cabin.

"You might want to talk to your Queen about her jaunts to the castle." Adam swings the door shut and turns to Terran. "If you would just be nice for a day, perhaps she would release you, and you may find a fae lass of your own."

"I don't want a fae lass," Terran says.

“Ahhh, every fae needs someone to come home to.” Nicholas chimes in.

Foster squeezes my hand. “You have been to the castle?”

“I was not discovered. This hour is about us.” I kiss his lips.

“I can be convinced to focus.” He wraps his hand around my neck and presses his mouth to mine. Releasing me, he smiles. “Now, let us go.”

We leap into the air, staying low under the canopy of branches, small splotches of dim light peeking through. Below us, ferns blanket the ground. The wind from our flight washes over me as we rush past trunks an arm-length wide until we exit the desert plain to the south. Rising high over the sand, the dry air cleanses my lungs. Tightening of my ribs reminds me of those I long to see. This is progress, I realize. For weeks, my chest felt as if a vice were tightening around it, the guilt and shame of leaving my family as I did foremost in my mind and heart.

Sonia should be dead, but she is not. I gave everything, left my family and my country, to end her, but her soul lives on. Now, she threatens graver destruction. I pray she only means this for Upper Earth and believes, as most do, I am dead. This tenet gives me the only peace that lets me sleep at night. My absence, faked morbidity, ensures my people and realm are safe, at least from direct threat. For it was I that she wanted. Frustration clouds my mind. The need to stay hidden limits my ability to help solve Sonia’s riddle. *She will be reconciled. With whom?*

I follow Foster’s lead, and we alight on the beach.

“You are furlongs away.” Foster swings our hands between us. “I wish you would let Alemayehu take Terran to Rotuga. He is ready.”

I trace a line in the sand with my toe, fearing what I will face once Terran is gone. His presence gives me purpose. Without him, I have nothing save these few nights a week with Foster. Terran’s mentoring and deciphering texts we received from the believers scouring our realm for any mention of Sonia are the only things that kept me sane the past months.

“It is a big responsibility for Alemayehu. He is not a young fae. I am also not sure what I will do once Terran is gone.”

“Alemayehu’s sons have pledged to watch Terran.” Foster’s lips form a smile, and he steps forward and brushes a kiss across my lips. “You are to marry me, that is what you are to do.”

“You cannot be serious. This is my fault for exposing myself to you.” Seeing his wide, round eyes, head shaking in defiance, I grimace. Allowing Foster to know that I live, to visit these nights, is the most selfish thing I have ever done. He pledges his happiness, but we cannot go on like this, him sneaking away to see me. We cannot build a life as such. I must be keeping him from building what could be a normal fae experience with another. Someone he could marry and have children with, grow old and gray with.

“You are free. When we first met, you dreamed of hiding away in a small cottage in the wood where you could live a simple life. Now you may.”

“You are right.” I straighten my back. “It will be enough.”

Pulling me to him, he kisses my lips. “And when I have trained another, I will retire my position, and we shall travel the realm together, living like gypsies.”

“What of children? That is no way for a young fae to grow up, untethered to any homeland.”

“We shall have younglings, or we shall not. Whatever we decide.”

“And what of your family? You would say goodbye, never see them again?” I ask.

“I could return to them periodically for a short bit.”

“But they could never know your true life, never share in our happiness.”

“Perhaps you could do research for the trinity witches until I am ready to join you. I know you enjoy aiding them. You also have your magic to continue to hone.”

My magic, another point of angst in my psyche. I have not used it since my fateful encounter with Sonia, something I have not shared with Foster. Perhaps I cannot even conjure it again. I would not slight the Goddesses for taking the gift. I may welcome the release, for it feels like a curse, a yoke upon my shoulders too heavy to bear.

Leaning over, I rake my hand through the surf and splash Foster. “Why are we talking about this? I do not plan on marrying you. I need to accept my new life, learn to embrace the quiet, simple solitude.”

He answers my offense, reaching into the sea and sprinkling water atop my head. “Yes, and I believe you shall attain that goal in a quicker fashion with Terran gone.”

“Why are you focused on having Terran leave?”

Pulling me to him, he kisses my lips. “Because then I shall have you all to myself. There will be no need for guards or another to share the cabin with.”

His mouth feels soft and warm on mine, and I allow myself to relish his embrace.

As the kiss ends, I smile. “I thought you were withholding spending the night with me alone until we marry.”

“I am. The absence of another will make our union more enticing, forcing you to agree to marry me.”

“You sound so sure. I feel as if my life shifts as sand in the wind.”

“But now it does not. You are not beholden to anything. You are free to be a simple fae.”

He keeps saying that I am free, but I have never felt more caged. Perhaps I do not fully trust that Sonia believes me dead. The witches’ warning plays through my mind. Theron and I could be in danger if discovered. Theron, in his Terran body, tucked in this realm, worries me less, but my gem-studded brow and brilliant red hair are hard to hide.

I raise my eyes to the portal connecting our realm to Upper Earth, the human realm. The ring of crystals powering the magic glows green, creating a haze of color upon our realm. Thoughts of the lower rings that bridge us to Lower Earth, the realm of the damned souls, swirl through my mind. Sonia still has the power to pass between all these realms.

Archangels have never had power in our realm—or that has been the held belief. They do, however, seem able to influence, control, or somehow assume bodies of other beings, as we witnessed via attacks from kobold, locusts, goblins, ogres, and dragons.

“Your head is with Sonia again.” Foster squeezes my hand.

“You do not know that. I could be picturing our life in the forest cottage or with packs on our backs, traveling the realm.”

“Why have you not mentioned aiding the witches?” He jiggles my fingers. “I mean, I appreciate it, truly, but my opinion has not stopped you from aiding them before.”

Taking his other hand, I hold his gaze. “I have sacrificed much. If I am discovered, it is all for naught.”

“You mean to tell me, if there were no danger, you would aid them? That also has not stopped you before.”

“If I am discovered, I put all fae in harm’s way again. And my sacrifice will be for naught.”

“You have your magic, but I see your position.”

I bite my lip and drop my gaze.

He leans down. “You do still have the power to wield your magic, correct?”

Jumping into the air, I tug on his fingers. “You see my position? Did you just acquiesce to my line of thought? I say, that *is* rare.”

He hovers before me. “And I am sure you have *never* used a distraction to hide an answer before. Your ability to conjure your magic remains, correct?”

I close my eyes and admit that I have not practiced my magic in the three months since I attempted to slay Sonia in her dragon form.

“Please tell me this is a joke. You jest, lest you be overheard by an angelic, or should I say, a demonic, spy.”

Leaning in, I whisper, “It is not.”

“Now I am more worried than before. You need your magic, Titania. If Sonia or some other enemy found you, or threatened our realm, you would need your powers.”

“It brings me pain to think about using my magic again.”

“That is why you need more joy in your life. Release Terran, take me as your husband, and let me bring you happiness every minute of every day. Tell me you will consider this.” He wraps his warm arms around me, his wings beating in sync with mine.

I take in his hopeful gaze. *How can I not give someone who brings me such joy a portion of the same?* “I will think about releasing Terran to Alemayehu in earnest.”

“Alemayehu’s soldiers will naturally look after anyone who is new to the ranks,” he says.

“I still wish we could stick him with a position like ditch digging.”

“In times of peace, did you not use your military for such tasks?” he asks.

“Yes, I did,” I say.

“Well, I would think it would be the same in Rotuga. No military man wants to sit around weaving baskets or darning jackets.” He swings our arms between us.

I cut my gaze sideways to him. “You would have me weaving and darning jackets? I will devise a test for Terran and have Alemayehu do the same. Customs in Rotuga may differ from ours.”

He spins to face me and kisses my lips. “Forgive me. I will task you with building, hauling water, and plowing. I like the test idea. It will put both your minds at ease.”

Running my hand through his hair, I smile. “Thank you for watching over me and my family.”

Shifting light from the ring crystals catches my eye, and I look up. The gray sky seems to quake, and a

low rumble reaches my ears. Releasing Foster's hands and tugging my hood tightly around my head, I beat my wings, rising toward the dome. I reach the ring and peer into Upper Earth as another wave of motion jolts across the realm barrier.

Chapter 2



ANOTHER SHUDDER TREMBLES THROUGH the bedrock separating our realm from Upper Earth.

“It is just the Ulawun volcano rumbling.” Foster wraps his arm around my waist. “You know it is common.”

“You act as if I have misplaced paranoia.”

“I see your unease. You are hardly ever still.”

“Can you blame me?” I spin into him. For as much as I believe I made us safer, the same tenets of our existence hold true. We rely on Upper Earth for our wellbeing.

“Sonia thinks you dead, gone. Our realm is safe.” He places his hands on my biceps.

“Yes, but if she is set to destroy the upper realm, it will affect us—if lava burns their land and smoke blocks the sun... if earthquakes destroy the bedrock...” With a hard beat of my wings, I approach the dome and place my palm on the cold rock. “If this barrier fails, we are doomed.” My breath catches in my lungs, and I fight to expel it.

Foster runs his palms down my arms. “Only once, in the thousands of years of the fae, have Upper Earth’s tragedies affected us. Rains flooded their realm for over a year, and our people persevered.”

I shake my head. “Those were very dark times. Many of the plants and animals of our realm nearly became extinct. We scrounged for sustenance in our soil, eating the bugs and worms to survive. Many fae died. The judges feel it in their bones. They say the dark times are near again. We have been through so much. How much more are we to bear?”

“Do you not believe the Creator will stop Sonia from destroying Upper Earth? He has done so much to protect His human creations. We were set in this realm to protect humans from the evil spirits below. The ethereal fae and the angels were set in Upper Earth to guard humans there.”

“Does the Creator have that power? Much of me believes the Creator is only that, a creator. What the beings do is up to them.”

His eyes narrow. “What of the Goddesses? Do you believe they have power to protect us?”

“I believe the Goddesses guide and bestow us with gifts, but I do not know what power the Goddesses

possess beyond that.”

“Whatever may come, we are safe now. You are safe now. You ensured that Sonia will spare our realm. Let that sink into your psyche. Once you send Terran away, take a period of rest. Walk through the forests, watch the birds, note the flowers, and let the beauty of our land restore your faith.”

I look up at the rock above me. *Faith*. That is also not something I wish to think about. “This is spoiling our flight. I do not want to waste our time with you thinking about these things.”

Sliding his hands to mine, he grips my fingers. “We need to talk about them. I want to share your burdens.”

Forcing a smile, I kiss him. “Race you.”

I pull my hands from his and dive. Holding my wings taut against my back, arms straight at my sides, I drop headfirst toward the ocean. The cool wind beats against my face as I eye the churning water rushing toward me. I stretch my arms above my head and plunge into the salty, cold, dark sea. As my body loses momentum, I kick my legs into the darkness, letting the nothingness surround me. I am safe. I am free. *If only I could become a mermaid*. My lungs start to protest, and I look up to catch sight of Foster’s dark form. I kick my legs and rise to the surface.

As my head breaches the water, I suck in a breath. “I won.”

“I let you win.” Foster splashes me.

“This cloak is heavy.” Treading water, I release the garment from my shoulders.

He takes it and, rising above the water, wrings it out. “This will do you no good if you do not wear it.”

“There is no one about this late.” With a kick and a hard beat of my wings, I join him.

We fly to the beach and alight on the sand. “Tell me of news from the castle. It has been almost a week. Surely there is something new.”

Tucking my cloak under his arm, he takes my hands. “There is much. Now that the rainy season will be over soon, they seem to be moving forward with many things.”

He tells me of my cousin Quinn, now King of my kingdom, and his wife and how their youngling is expected in months. My cousin Princess Gatuika and her fiancé Prince Lowell of Hilbron, the kingdom lying to our east, have set their wedding for the summer solstice, to be held at my palace. Her sisters Makani and Isla continue their school and dote on my parents and my maid Alfreda. The girls’ parents still visit, Mother taken for walks in the garden by her sister often.

“But she remains unchanged, not a word has passed her lips since she insisted your things be held in chests,” Foster says.

“And Father?” Tears pool in my eyes as I think of Father’s crimson beard laced with silver strands.

“He is often with Quinn, busying himself helping with affairs of the kingdom.”

“Parents should not lose all their children as my parents have.”

Foster wipes a tear from my cheek with his thumb. “I thought we were to escape our challenges for a while.”

I step back and wipe my face with my fingers. “Yes, you are right. Tomorrow I will make a picnic, and we will fly someplace exotic to enjoy a meal together.”

“I shall like that very much.” He clutches my chin and presses his lips to mine.

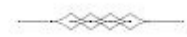
Even with the pressure in my chest that plagues me when I think of my family, the warmth of Foster’s lips against mine, the soft-yet-firm set of his mouth, transports me.

Ending the kiss, he squeezes my hand. “We should let Adam and Nicholas return to their families.”

I take my cloak from his arms, wrap it around my shoulders, and raise the hood, shivering as the cold, wet drape touches my skin.

We retrace our path, sweeping over the desert and back through the woods to my cottage. Landing on the fern-covered floor of the forest, Foster takes my hand. We hop to the porch, and I fit my finger on his lips then kiss him quickly.

I listen to the banter inside, Terran complaining about the boring games and Adam grunting in reply. It is past time Terran integrated into our society. That is my fault. I must face my uncertain future.



“TEA?” BIA, GODDESS OF POWER, offers a white porcelain cup ringed with purple irises. “Your mother is here.”

I follow her gaze to the far side of the bright green meadow. Flowers of every color dot the field. Three women sit around a table canopied by tree limbs: Artemis, goddess of the hunt; Athena, goddess of wisdom; and Mother.

I blink, and I am before them. Bia lounges on an empty chair.

“Sit, Titania.” Athena points a long, thin, golden-nail-tipped finger at the empty chair. “We will be five then.”

I study the faces of the goddesses and meet Mother’s eyes.

“You are not alive, Titania. You need to accept what is.” She pats the empty, tufted seat beside her.

Heart pounding, I suck in a breath and bolt upright.

“Same nightmare?” Terran’s voice and the scent of coffee reorient me.

In my cabin. In my woods. In my Kingdom. In my Realm. *You need to accept what is.*

“Yes.” Wiping the cold sweat from my brow, I wrap the covers around my waist and cross to the table. “Or a version of it.”

“You’ve never said what the dream is about.”

“No contractions.” I pour tea into a tin cup.

Terran rolls his eyes. “You have never said what the dream is about, and you *are* deflecting.”

“Deflecting?” I raise an eyebrow.

“You are evading the question. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes.” I sit opposite him. “I have decided Alemayehu and I will each test you on fae culture and skills, and if you pass, you can go to Rotuga with Alemayehu to join their army.”

“Really?” Eyebrows raised, a smile forms on his face. His knee bounces under the table, and for the first time in three months, he appears genuinely excited.

“Maybe the test will be that you must go a whole day without one human term, mannerism, or action.”

He raises his arm and holds his wrist in front of his face. "Can we start now?"

"Why did you raise your arm like that?"

"To look at my imaginary watch?" His voice rises in pitch.

"A fae does not have a watch."

Rolling his eyes, he lowers his arm. "Okay, now?"

"If you wish."

"I do wish."

If Terran is only to be with me a few more days, then I mean to take advantage of his help. We clear a large area in front of the cottage, moving rocks from one side, using them to build a divider in the middle to pen goats on the other.

As the last boulders are placed and the sun hangs low in the sky, I sit atop the wall.

"We need to till the ground for a garden tomorrow, and then fashion a fence to hold the goats."

"That"—he smiles—"is going to take a whole day. I thought you said I could leave once I passed the tests."

I lift my water pouch and take a sip. "Alemayehu will not come until the first day of the week, so that will give us another day to finish the projects."

"And that is what you are to do once I am gone? Plant and tend a garden, raise goats?"

"Yes." I gaze into the forest.

"It will not be enough. We are the same. We cannot be satisfied with a simple life."

"You do not know that, and if you admit this to me, then I may never let you leave." I push off the rocks.

"I am to join an army. I will have a purpose. I do not see that you have any now that your research is stalled."

"What if I have served my purpose already and I am meant to enjoy my lack of purpose?" I approach the cottage.

He flits ahead of me and opens the door. "What is your nightmare?"

I bite my lip, wondering whether to further his argument with the admission. "It is of my mother. She is with the Goddesses and tells me to accept what is."

Letting the door swing shut with a bang, Terran jumps to my side. "See? Accepting that you have no purpose is your worst nightmare. We are the same."

Shaking my head, I lift a pot of water onto the stove and stoke the fire. "I do not believe so. I am new to this life, or second life. I will adjust."

Waiting for bathwater to heat, I cut a chunk of bread and gather some meats and cheeses into a basket. Terran does not know what he is talking about. I do not know that I can trust the message from Mother and the Goddesses after they tried to persuade me to abandon my promise to the witches of the trinity. Of course, the women may have known Sonia already had the power of an archangel. *Would I have been happier in the soul realm with them?* No, it was not my time. I will not believe it was.

This stubborn idea pushes me to a deeper quandary. *If I do not trust they had pure intentions, have I lost*

faith in the Goddesses? In Mother? Or had I cheated death out of selfishness and fear? Did I belong with the Goddesses? Was that their plan for me? Could I serve my people better in the spiritual realm? Should I have stayed dead? My heart thuds as I think of never touching Foster again. But you would have your mother. It is that thought which spurs my belief that Sonia wants her mother. What other bond, save for that of for a child, could have a larger pull over a being's heart?

"The water boils. Would you like me to take it to the tub for you?" Terran's whisper brings me from my churning thoughts.

I shake my head and lift the pot from the stove, amazed at his offer of aid. It is the first time he has shown kindness. I remember Hunter's assessment of poor character and disdain for his half-brother. Yet, Alena, another witch of the trinity, sees hope for him. I will continue to withhold judgment yet err on the side of caution. He must remain in Middle Earth. If free, Terran could reveal to Sonia that I still live. It is a risk that he knows I still exist in this realm, but there was no other who could ensure his security in the transition to fae.

Terran's eyebrows shoot up as I enter the cabin, my dress swishing about my legs. "You must have a fancy"—he bites his lip—"event planned for tonight."

"You were about to say date."

"But I did not. What do you call dating? Or a date?"

"If you are dating someone, then you are courting. We do not have a word like date. We would just say we are seeing them or name the activity."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome." Part of me feels guilty that his acting as a fae dampens his personality, but I would guess he may find a way to integrate it once fae life becomes more natural.

"Same boots, same dagger, I see."

"I do not need more than one pair of boots."

Hearing the thud of footsteps on the porch, I check the peephole and swing the door open wide as Timothy, another of my former guards, and Foster remove their cloaks.

"Hello, fair Queen," Timothy says.

"I am not your queen." I take his wrap and fit it on the hook beside the door.

I explain Terran's test, and Timothy expresses nothing but glee at the chance to challenge Terran's ability to act true to fae characteristics.

Foster and I take our leave, descending the steps hand in hand.

"You look beautiful tonight," he says.

Pushing to my toes, I press my lips to his. "Thank you. You look handsome, too."

"Where should we go?"

"How about the northern coast of Lindleton? We may be able to see the Northern Lights."

"Splendid idea. I have never seen them, have you?"

"Yes, although they were faint both times. I hear in winter they are the brightest."

"And if there are no lights, perhaps we can find a polar bear. I would love to see a polar bear."

“A polar bear? You never told me that.”

“You still have much to learn about me.” He runs a finger down my nose.

We walk to the tree line and leap into the air, whizzing around tree trunks in the deep forest. At the coast, we rise high, flying just feet below the dome separating us from Upper Earth. Thinking of the Northern Lights brings memories of my trips to the lights with my cousins and then my suitor. I shudder when I think of what my life would have been like had I married him.

“You are deep in thought again.” Foster squeezes my fingers.

“I am sorry. It is hard not to think of everything that has passed.”

“I will help.”

He begins to narrate our journey, speaking of the elephants and black and white bears of Chastam, the birds with feathers of every color.

“But this land has no redeeming qualities whatsoever,” he says as we pass over the border to Lindleton. “The birds are gray, bears ugly brown. It rains all year long, and the food is bland as mud.”

I open my mouth to admonish him, but he lifts a finger.

“Do not say it is not true.”

“The coasts are beautiful, vegetation bright green, and water oh-so blue in the late summer.”

“When it is not raining. Which is a lot. I mean, we have rainy season, but then it is dry for months. In Lindleton, it rains every day.”

I roll my eyes. “That must be an exaggeration. When we vacationed there, it only rained one afternoon.”

“You are blessed by the Goddesses in all things. I am sure it was them who gave you the gift of sunshine for your holiday.”

Not so in my dreams, I think as we land on a barren plane near the north sea under a remote portal to Upper Earth.

“I see no lights yet.” Removing his cloak, he spreads it on the ground. “Should we eat and wait?”

“Yes, we should eat.” Pulling his pack closer, he reaches in and produces a bunch of grapes.

He pops one in his mouth then holds one out for me. I take it and, lifting my chin, toss it up and catch it in my mouth as it comes down. I slide off his lap, and we snack on the bread and cheese and sip wine from our flasks. We lie on the cloak, side by side, holding hands, watching for the lights.

After many minutes of silence, he pushes up on one elbow. “What would you have done if Sonia did not come with the dragons? If an occasion for you to fake your death had not presented itself? Would you have wed Mikel?”

Sadness settles in my psyche as I remember the pain my engagement to Mikel caused Foster. I force the thoughts away. I cannot undo the past, all I can do is face my future with hope. “I had to have a bigger army to protect our fae. I knew there would be another attack. The engagement contract gave me a year to wed. I planned to delay the marriage as long as I could, but if I had to honor the contract, I would have.”

“But he, his whole family, are so...” His lips contort.

“Pretentious, stuck up, entitled, patriarchal, condescending? I know.” Folding my arms across my middle, I sit up. “Why are you asking me this now? I thought we had been over everything.”

Sitting up, he leans over his legs. Flying over Lindleton, his family's kingdom, seemed to have brought it all back. "I do not see how you could abandon, or sacrifice your—"

"My morals, my heart?" Taking his hand, I spin to my knees. I duck my head so we are eye to eye as my heart threatens to leap from my body. "I wish you had said this before, let me know you felt this way. I know I hurt you. It broke my heart to do it. That is how I know I love you, but it had to be done. Sonia was coming for me, for my kingdom, and she would not have stopped there. She would have taken our entire realm. I needed a bigger army, and Mikel had the largest one."

Foster turns his head away. "It makes me sick to think... He did not deserve you. None of them did. I hate that you had—"

"Shhh." I cup my hands around his cheeks. "Do not hate them. Yell at me. It was me. I deceived all of them. And believe me, I feel all the shame and guilt that I deserve."

"No." His jaw goes hard. "If they had open minds, would have enough respect for you to honor your truth, you would not have had to go to those lengths."

Running my fingers from his temple to his jaw, I shake my head. "It would not change the fact that I had to face Sonia. It would not alter that I needed to die. Will you ever forgive me? Because if you cannot I fear we cannot ever be truly happy. This, you and I, may be all I can ever give you. I cannot give you a wedding with friends and family to witness. I cannot provide you evenings around the fire with your family jostling our younglings on their knees. I understand if I am not enough—"

"No, love." He plants kisses on my cheeks. "I am so sorry. I did not mean to ruin our evening. You know I want to be with you, however our lives unfold, but it makes me sick to my stomach thinking of how they dismissed you, acted as if they were better than you. They do not deserve to reap the benefits of your sacrifice. I am trying to understand the magnitude of your devotion to this cause. That you would sacrifice every bit of your happiness for it."

"You have done the same. You had no life save from your position as my spy. You came when I called, went as I commanded."

The sides of his lips creep up. "You do not know that. You were off galivanting with Holden, then his brother Brandon, and then your suitors. Perhaps I spent many nights in pubs with pretty maids, danced with them late into the night, took them into my room for a night."

I steel my reaction not knowing if he is trying me. "You are right. I do not know, but for the record, I never liked Brandon, and I never shared anything beyond conversation with the suitors."

"You spent the night with Brandon."

Posting hands to hips, I roll my eyes. "We were fighting goblins." I shudder as I remember the grotesque bodies of the goblins turning bald head over bulging middle in the churning water of the flooded canyon. Dropping to my butt, I hold his gaze. "I sacrificed everything because I had to. There is something inside me that drives me to protect the fae and the humans above us. Do you think I was given the power to blast beams of energy from my palms to entertain or delight? No, the Goddesses granted me the ability to perform remarkable things. I could not waste my gift."

A smile grows on his face as he places his hands on my cheeks. "And this is why I have loved you from

the second you stole my quiver and bow. You are the bravest person I know.”

I lean in and kiss him, pressing my lips to his.

He answers my kiss with the same intensity, and his arms wind around me. As his lips pull away, he leans his forehead on mine. “I did not mean for this evening to go this way. I am sorry,” he whispers.

“Do not be. As you said, we need to speak of these things. If we are to be true partners, you must share your feelings with me.”

“What keeps you from saying you will marry me?” Foster asks.

“I am still figuring out my life. It was selfish for me to let you know I still live, to commandeer your nights this way, to entice you to leave your post, your family. We need to make sure we will not make each other miserable.”

“The only way I would be miserable is not being with you.”

After another long kiss, we decide there will be no lights to see this night and start the journey back to my cabin. I try to imagine my life post-Terran: waking with the light, sipping tea, tending the garden, milking the goats. Perhaps I shall raise sheep and learn to weave. Hunting may take a part of my day. I could add to the small cabin, enclose the bath area. Foster will visit on weekends, and when I feel we are both content, I could say yes to being his wife. He would leave his post, and we could travel or do whatever else we may choose.

The thoughts take a quick backseat as we land on the grass outside the cabin. Loud shouts come from within. Shaking my head, I rush up the steps.

Foster grabs my arm. “One more kiss before our evening ends?”

I open my mouth, and before I can speak, his lips press to mine. I yield to the soft pressure of his skin, savoring the feel of his arms around me, the scent wafting from his frame, the warmth enveloping me.

“The fae do not behave in this manner,” Timothy bellows from within.

“Ugh.” Foster sighs. “Goddesses, please.”

Pressing my finger to his lips, I smile. “It was a wonderful date, thank you.”

Hands on my waist, he kisses me again. Warmth spreads through my body, and I never want it to end. Releasing me, he waves me ahead of him.

I enter the cabin to find Terran and Timothy at the table, holding cards. “The fae do not behave in what manner?”

“He was counting the cards,” Timothy says.

“I wanted to win. Is not that the point of the game, to win? How was I supposed to know that the fae do not count cards?” Terran’s eyes grow wide as if pleading with me.

Unlatching my cloak, I swing it to the hook. “You should always assume if an action is ethically wrong, or even a gray area, that fae, in general, would not pursue it.”

“Please do not count this against me. I think I have done really well today,” Terran says.

I cut my eyes to Timothy. “Apart from the card incident, how do you judge him?”

Timothy acquiesces that, other than being a swindling mouse, Terran has passed.

He stands. “So, is it decided? I pass?”

"I believe you do," I say.

"Yes." Terran throws his cards on the table. He looks up, his eyes darting between the three of us. "I mean, praise the Goddesses?"

"It is fine, friend." I pat his shoulder. "Congratulations. I am happy that you are ready for fae life. If Al-emayehu approves, you will be free of this cabin and forest for good."

"Yes." Terran slaps his leg.

Timothy takes his leave, and I walk outside with Foster as he prepares to go as well.

"I wish you would stay till morning. I have dove eggs." I squeeze his hand as our arms stretch between us.

"Save them till Terran is gone. I will come that very night. Then we shall be free to come and go as we please." Pulling me to him, he kisses me.

I watch Foster, his orange hair reflecting the light from the cabin, until the dark forest takes him. Trapping back into the cabin, Terran and I prepare for sleep. The next morning, I wake to the bitter smell of coffee brewing. With no disturbing dreams of the Goddesses or Mother, I cross to the slit in the door, relishing the sight of first light causing the hovering fog to glow.

Terran lifts his cup as I join him at the table. "The last day you may have to endure the smell of coffee."

I touch my tin cup to his. "Yes, we will complete the goat pen, and I would like to find a small pasture for sheep."

"Now you are to have sheep, too?"

"I should learn to weave and sew. People cannot swipe clothes from the castle for me forever."

Terran leans forward. "To sew? I thought you said fae females learn to sew from an early age."

"Yes, most do, but with four older brothers, I tended to join in whatever they were doing. After losing them, I spent all my free time studying histories and training to become monarch."

"Being the one who is supposed to assume leadership is tough. My father expected perfection."

"I am sorry your situation did not work out."

One side of his lip curls. "No, you are not, but you should be. If I achieved my goal, the curse would never have been broken. You would never have been dragged into this affair. You would have your kingdom, and the fae would have gone on with their merry little existence with no troubles. Now look what you have. Nothing. Just like me. All because of my brother."

Astonished at his assessment, and taking a minute to process his words, I take a sip of my tea. Under the rule of Sonia and her sons, Thanatos and Theron, the witches would have wiped out the vampire population. The old guard of fae may not have blinked an eye, even welcomed the culling, but many humans would have been harmed to satisfy Sonia's wishes. *Would she have stopped with destruction of the vampires?*

I cut my eyes to him. "Now you call him brother?"

"That is what you question about what I said?"

"I worry that Sonia would have taken innocent lives."

"Unless they were human, you would have no responsibility to intervene. Your life would have proceeded without turmoil. You would still be Queen. The battles with the kobold, goblins, ogres, and dragons

would not have happened. So now I ask”—he leans in so our faces are but inches apart—“who is the bad guy, and who is the good guy?”

“All of the Creator’s beings should be treated with respect. You were part vampire. What if Sonia killed your mother? What if she sought to end your Earth life?”

Terran bolts up, flinging his chair across the cabin. “She wouldn’t do that. Let’s just finish the goat pen.”

He stomps outside, and I run my palms to the edges of the table. My stomach turns, knowing he is half right and that only I am to blame for my life path. If I had not aided the trinity of witches that first time, much would be different. Maybe many more lives would have been lost. That mattered, even if they were beings of Upper Earth once considered soulless. *And would Sonia have stopped with destruction of the vampires, or would she attack the werewolves, elves, and us?* I grip the corners of the table. None of this can be known now. What is, is.

The day passes with few words between me and Terran. I think about what Foster would say about Terran’s rant. Likely that he aims to alter my opinion of Sonia and his father, that he is a manipulator and wants me to feel sympathy for his plight, perhaps even sway my opinion of the trinity of witches. I am not blind to the grays of this battle but know I am on the right side of it.

I breach the silence over dinner, inquiring whether Terran is anxious about his move to Rotuga.

“I am used to people disliking me. It will be fine.”

“Why do you assume they will not like you? Fae are not like human teens. You are an adult fae, will be a soldier. There is respect attached to that position. If you perform well, contribute, and show leadership aptitude, you could be promoted. You will have comrades, perhaps even friends, and there are plenty of beautiful fae girls in Alemayehu’s village. His is the largest in the kingdom.”

He peers at me over his soup bowl. “Do they all look like you?”

I cut my eyes away and then back to him. “What do you mean?”

“Well, your stones, or whatever they are on your forehead. You never mentioned them. Do all female fae have those?”

Touching the middle stone on my brow, I chuckle. “I had not thought of that. I apologize. I am the only fae with these decorations that I know of. Before I escaped Lower Earth and Abaddon by exploding one of our rings, my markings were more like Alemayehu’s, dark lines and dots, but after reentering Middle Earth, these graced my brow.”

“Weird.” He lifts his spoon to his lips.

“Yes, they are strange.”

The rest of the meal passes in silence, as does the evening, both of us with our noses in books. He inquires about the rings and the crystals required to power their magic. I recite only what is commonly known because the exact crystals and the procedure for activating the rings are secrets known only to the Ring Keepers and monarchs.

“So, you must physically take out the crystals to close the rings?”

“Yes.”

“And if they are in place, the rings are open, which is most of the time unless there is an emergency, like

someone trying to invade your realm? So, a fae can pass through the ring anytime they wish?"

"Correct, and technically, yes, but rules require you to ask permission of the Ring Keepers before entering Upper Earth. The rings are watched at all times."

He narrows his gaze. "So, you got permission to travel to Upper Earth to help me escape Lower Earth."

"Yes."

"And this is common knowledge?"

"No, my alliance with the witches is known only to a select few believers. We have a Ring Keeper and High Judge who supported the missions."

"Believers?"

"Those who believe in the Creator, the Goddesses, the original teachings."

Leaning forward, he lets his book fall to his lap. "Why am I just learning of this now? How much of what I learned were the original teachings? What do most fae believe?"

I stand and pace to the fire. "Most fae believe we are of the Creator, but many fail to pray to the Goddesses, lack faith that they can direct our paths, that they will protect us. It has been a long time since the great flood, so fae have felt secure for many millennia."

He shakes his head. "The great flood? Like the one in the Bible?"

"Yes, water from above flooded into our portals, and they had to be closed for almost a year. Those that survived the deluges of water were left in a dark world, and thousands died of malnutrition. It is known as the darkest time. Many of the aging fae see signs of the return of a dark time."

"Great, I'm saved from endless darkness to face the threat of endless darkness."

"No. My sole mission, till my dying breath, holds to do all in my power to keep light and water flowing into our realm. That is why whatever information you are keeping from us about your family is so important. It could help us keep Sonia from plunging us all into darkness... All of us, including the Upper Earth realm."

"I'm only nineteen. Family trees weren't high on my priority list."

Crossing the small space, I grip the arms of his chair and lean over. "You were being groomed to be the next High Priest of the Witches. Do not offend me by pretending you were not privy to your family's history. We will see how long you hold out once you are eating earthworms for sustenance."

"You are quite fierce when you try to be."

The timbers rumble under my boots and Terran's chair vibrates in my grip. My dishes clank and crash onto the floor, and burning logs spill from the hearth. Dropping to my knees, I crawl toward the fiery wood that bounces toward my trunk as the walls quake around me. I grab the water bucket, douse the embers, and brace myself between the wall and the trunk.

Chapter 3



“I TAKE IT YOU’RE NOT DOING THIS? I miss LA a little bit less now,” Terran yells over the pounding of board against board. “I’m guessing there are no building codes here. Is this roof rated for falling trees?”

The knocking subsides to a tremble, and the structure stills. Clutching the side of my cot, I start to stand.

“Get down!” Terran yells.

“Wha—” Before I can get the word out, another rumble jolts through the cabin, sending my legs up and my back to the deck. My lungs seize as my breath catches and shoulder blades sear with pain. I gulp for air as the quake subsides. I sit up to find Terran hunched under the upturned armchair.

He rises. “Earthquakes 101: Protect your head, and don’t get up until the aftershock.”

“One-oh-one? Aftershock?” I spin to my hands and knees.

“One-oh-one, a basic class and the most important thing to know, and aftershock, the quake after the quake. LA had many earthquakes. You’ve never been in an earthquake?”

“No. Aubren has not experienced a quake for many generations. Sonia is making good on her promise.”

We hold our posts for what seems like eternity until Terran declares the tremble to be finished. Crossing to the bureau, I sweep the broken pottery into a pile. We right all the furniture and clean the floor and hearth. Eyes panning the forest, I note a couple of leaning trees, their roots protruding from the dirt. We were lucky, and I say a silent prayer to the Goddesses that Foster and my family and fae were all so blessed. Heart pounding, I pile dry logs into the fireplace and light the tinder.

“So, is that what you mean when you talk about a believer? That these tragedies of nature are caused by evil beings?”

I spin to face him. “Sonia literally threatened this. These quakes, if they continue and worsen, will degrade the bedrock and collapse our realm. We will be forced to abandon it, and the fae will be no more.”

Crossing outside, I suck in the cool, moist air. I shoot to the treetops, scouring for significant holes in the forest. I startle as Terran lands beside me.

I point to the dark dome above. “See? The ring is closed. They will wait till morning to open them.”

“All rings in the realm?”

My mind pings with a warning at his question. Now is the time for a lie. "That is protocol."

Motion below catches my eye, and I look down to see a being land on our porch. The fae sheds a hood and swings the cabin door open. The light from the fire illuminates orange hair. *Foster.*

"Titania?" He strides inside.

I drop to the cabin. "I am here."

Closing the distance between us, he wraps his arms around me and squeezes tightly. "You are okay?"

"I am okay. Is everyone at the castle safe?" I cling to him.

Releasing me, he shakes his head. "I do not know. I was with my family. I came to you first."

"Why did you come here first? You must go to them. Make sure everyone is okay. I will come with you. I can stay in the forest. No one will see me."

"What about Terran?"

"Curses." My heart thuds in my chest, and I bolt outside.

Terran sits on the porch, swinging his legs over the edge. "I am right here. Where am I going to go? You have given me no maps."

I press my palms to my ribs as my breath draws in and out, in and out. The need to go to my castle, to each of the villages to see my fae, ensure everyone is safe, strums through my veins like waves pounding the beach.

"Foster, go!"

"Goddesses, you do not have to yell." He stomps past me. "I was out of wits worried about you, thinking a tree fell on the cabin."

"I am sorry. I am beside myself thinking of my family and fae. I feel frustrated that I cannot help."

"I will go and send word, or come myself, to let you know all is well. The Goddesses will protect them, you will see."

"Thank you, and please forgive me. I did not mean to raise my voice to you."

"I do." He presses his mouth to mine in a hard kiss.

I answer his intensity, clutching his jacket, then push him away. "Go."

He presses his forehead to mine. "Be safe."

"I will."

Raising his hood, he leaps into the air. I watch the dark forest until his form is out of sight. I realize the wood appears blacker than ever before. I sense no movement, see no light reflecting from small eyes, and hear no sounds from the forest. The animals know this is the time for caution as well. After another survey of the trees, I back into the cabin and close the door.

"The Goddesses will protect them? That sounds like a fool's folly. If that's what a believer is, I'm not one. You can't seriously think these mystical beings watch over and protect you." Terran slumps into a chair.

Taking a seat opposite him, I lean on my elbows. "Tell me about the earthquakes. What other precautions did you take?"

He stands and crosses to the bureau holding the dishes. Describing that tall furniture would be tethered to the wall, he reviews how one might stay safe during a quake.

Grabbing a parchment, pen, and ink from the drawer, I start a list. A thud sounds from outside, and the structure creaks. Bracing for another quake, and sensing none, I rise and cross to the door, checking the peephole.

Adam stands, hands on hips. "It is I. Let me in."

I swing the door open. "Is there news from the castle? Is everyone okay?"

Adam reports that no one in the castle was injured, but that the kitchen and library were in shambles. I inquire about the rest of the kingdom, and he indicates that reports are still being gathered. Frustrated at my inability to help, I show Adam the list of earthquake precautions.

"Where will I say I came up with this?"

"It does not matter. Say you noticed the shelves falling and books flying off.."

Adam backs to the door with the list. Noting my black cape beside the door, my mind sparks an idea.

"Can you bring some dark leather?" I ask.

"Of course. How much?"

"Perhaps six palms by six palms and some string to match?"

Even with the late hour, I cannot rest, so I enlist Terran to help me anchor the bureau to the planks behind it and add slim bars of wood across the open shelves.

"There is still nothing you can do to prevent one of those huge trees from crushing you." Terran rests in the chair.

"We have wings, and I have my magic."

"I have never seen your magic. Would it really be helpful in an earthquake? What exactly are you capable of?"

"You are becoming quite testy."

"And you are becoming unhinged. Realizing I am right? That raising goats and sheep is not going to satisfy you?"

"But you, my friend, are becoming more fae every minute. That is three sentences straight without any contractions."

His eyes grow wide. "Ghastly. But I think you may be skirting the topic. Do you have access to your magic or not? Perhaps I could escape through any of the rings any time I want."

I grip the chair back and lean over it. "But now you will never know. Because they will leave the rings closed until the morrow when Alemayehu comes."

"Seriously, show me," he says.

I know it is not a wise use of my magic and pray to the Goddesses I can still wield it. I raise my hand and will the power toward my palm.

It grows green and I smile. "Do you still wish to experience my magic?"

"Hit me."

With a curl of my hand, I sling a small spark of power. It darts across the space, landing in the exact center of his hand.

"Oooww!" Closing his palm, he wraps the other hand around it.

“Perhaps you need some aloe for that? I did that to myself once. It took two days to heal.”

“You are pure evil, woman.” Terran waves his injured hand in the air.

I cross to the bureau and slide the jar of salve across the table to him. “But you will not tempt me to use my magic again, will you?”

My pulse races as I watch him treat his wound. Guilt itches at my psyche, but he did ask for it. And now I know I have my magic. But with worry for my fae, I know I will not sleep tonight. I grab a bottle of wine and two glasses and sit kitty corner to Terran, pouring him a drink and then myself.



SLEEP FINALLY COMES, AND my mind buzzes with worry about the state of the kingdom. *It was a small tremor*; I reassure myself. Loud thuds sound on the porch, shaking the tiny structure, and I remind myself to stay present. Today, Alemayehu will test Terran for his readiness to join the Rotuga army.

Rising, I cross to the door and peer through the small opening. Alemayehu stands with a large soldier flanking him. I swing the door open.

“Welcome, friend.” I offer my arm.

Locking his palm around my forearm, Alemayehu points to the soldier. “My eldest, Lencho. He will be Terran’s superior when he joins our army.”

My fingers wrap not halfway around Lencho’s bulging arm. I note his broad shoulders and muscled chest and imagine that Alemayehu may have looked much like Lencho when younger. I invite them inside. To my surprise, Terran stands, arms straight against his sides, palms rigid. I raise an eyebrow. *This is new*. I cannot imagine Terran ever showing deference to anyone. I amend my assessment quickly. *Except perhaps to his father or grandmother*. They were, and may still be, the two most powerful witches of Upper Earth, and the only ones who could either elevate or condemn him, sealing his fate.

Terran strides forward, arm raised to greet Alemayehu. “Good to see you, sir, and thank you for coming.”

Alemayehu chuckles and takes the boy’s arm. “Well, this is a first. Good for you, Terran.”

“I am ready to begin the next chapter of my life in this realm. Thank you for the opportunity.” Terran extends his arm to Lencho.

Lencho crosses his arms over his bulging chest. “We will see if you are worthy to serve.”

Alemayehu describes how they plan to administer the test in three parts with ten challenges in each, including a section on skill, fae culture, and fae history. Lifting tools and weapons from the wall, we file outside, Lencho inquiring about the story we will use for Terran’s appearance in their ranks.

Skin colors of the fae in Rotuga range from medium brown, like the feathers of an emu, to almost black, like Alemayehu’s. With Terran’s light coloring, the story he will tell is that he craves adventure and wishes to experience a different culture. Since his family has many sons to work their farm in Aubren, he traveled to Rotuga to start his own life. Few fae will understand this, as we tend to be inherently bound to our family and land, but it is not completely unheard of. Fae sometimes, although rarely, do venture beyond their birthplaces. The story is akin to Foster’s: a farm boy itching for a different life, spurred to action by the threat of

invaders from Lower Earth.

Terran passes the skills tests easily, and Alemayehu asks him to dance.

Terran scoffs, posting his hands to his hips. "If you would like me to dance to hip-hop or rap, then I may oblige you, but I will not do a jig."

"Just show us. A fae not dancing will look odd," Alemayehu says.

"Not all fae can love dancing."

Alemayehu shakes his head. "All fae love music and dancing. You must at least attempt each trial, or you do not pass."

Terran relents, posting his hands to his waist and, lifting his knees one after another, shifts his weight from foot to foot in a bouncing motion.

Alemayehu stifles a chuckle and accepts the attempt.

Terran recounts fae history with few errors.

Although not wholly in support of the plan, Lencho must concede Terran has passed his tests.

Alemayehu assents that Theron is now ready for life in the Rotugan army. Both make it very clear that with a single misstep, Terran will find himself in the dungeon.

I smooth my vest. "Terran is aware of the conditions of his position. I pray he will be an asset to your army and finds happiness in doing such."

"We should all pray to the Goddesses for that. Let us go." Lencho strides toward the door.

Terran's frozen features face Alemayehu then turn to me. "This is real?"

I nod and extend an arm. "Goddesses' speed."

He blinks, and his fingers lock above my wrist. "Thank you."

"Be well, friend." I watch him lift his pack to his shoulders and follow Lencho.

Alemayehu wraps his arms around me. "You will be well?"

"I will be well, friend. Write to me of news."

He pats my back. "I will visit as soon as I can."

"Thank you."

We step out onto the porch, and I watch as, one after another, they jump into the air, rise to the canopy, and slip between the branches. I examine the space around my cabin. With the garden seeds planted and the pen and meadow ready for goats and sheep, the evening spans out as a blank slate. I drop my eyes and, seeing the dead fowl from Terran's archery skills test, scoop them up.

"Well, at least I have you to clean."

I am pulling the meat from a bone with my teeth when I hear bleating sounds outside. I check the forest to find Foster alighting in the center of the stone-ringed enclosure, a small goat under each arm. Adam, Nicholas, and Timothy land beside him, each also carrying an animal under each arm. They release the goats into the pen and herd four sheep into the meadow. Indicating they have another trip to bring supplies, the four fly off.

I fill buckets with water for makeshift troughs, and by the time they return, the goats have cleared their small pen of ferns. Each of the soldiers land on the porch and set boxes atop it. I open the lids to find the first

filled with texts on tending animals and farming. The second holds embroidering materials; the third fabrics, string, and sewing implements; and the fourth, parts for a spindle.

They apologize for making their visit short but report the High Council will convene on the issue of earthquakes, and the army is going house to house to educate all in the kingdom.

I thank them for the supplies as they take their leave. Sliding the boxes inside, I search the fabric bin for the leather. Finding none, my spirits dip. I parse through the other spans of fabric, finding them all of light color. These will not satisfy my needs like the dark leather.

I set to work reading the texts on goats and sheep. The next day, I tend the animals, read during the midday heat, eat supper, and then hunt as the light wanes, devouring my texts well into the night. I repeat this the next day but, by the third, realize I have run out of books. I stare at the boxes of sewing materials thinking I may go mad. I never liked these sedentary activities. Recalling how Mother and Abeetha would make me sit for at least an hour a day embroidering handkerchiefs, I shudder.

Where are Adam, Nicholas, and Timothy? Foster often came to visit mid-week. *Where is he, and why have I not at least had some communication?* Perhaps the earthquake caused more aftermath than they knew. Tucking these worries away for later, I decide my next task will be enclosing the bathing area.

I fill a pouch with water and start into the forest, determined to build my washing room. Downing trees is slow, but I topple four, dragging them each to my clearing. As the light wanes, I identify another perfect tree, hack at the bark, and then saw into the last small portion until the tree crashes over. Stripping the branches, I tie ropes around the girth and drag the log through the forest. Almost to my pasture, I raise my leg to ford a boulder. Movement catches my eye in the clearing ahead. My heart thuds, and I lower my body, one knee at a time, to the forest floor, balancing the trunk on my back. I hear the footfalls of boots on my porch. Raising my head, I try to make out the person in front of the cabin. Head covered by a hood and body by a long cloak, it is impossible in the dimming light. If only they would spin my direction, perhaps I could catch sight of hair color, but if I can see them, then they may see me as well.

Goddesses. How long will I be stuck hunched under this trunk? Frustrated, I attempt to even out my breaths. It will not do to have a tree rising and falling on the forest floor.

“Coo-oo-oo.”

I strain my ears to ensure they have not misheard.

“Coo-oo-oo.”

The unmistakable dove’s call reaches my ears again. It must be a friend. *Goddesses, please let it be Foster.*

“Here.” I lift my face and call out.

I press my hands into the ground, pushing my arms out straight, attempting to stand with the weight of the tree on my back.

The body appears before me. “What are you doing?”

“Adam. Thanks to the Goddesses. Can you help with this trunk?”

“Of course, but Queen, what are you doing?” He hops to the far end and lifts.

“Finishing my bathing area.”

“How far have you dragged this?”

“How else would I get them there?” As we near the cabin, I release the trunk, and it thuds atop the stack of others. “Sorry, that was rude. It has been a long day.”

“You should have requested a donkey or cart.”

Standing straight, I post fists to hips. “Perhaps so, but this is what I did.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “Are you well?”

“Oh yes, I am quite fine. My muscles are in top shape. My mind, however...” I point to my temple. “I do not believe I am suited for solitary life. I need things to do.”

Adam reaches inside his cloak and produces a bundle of dark leather. “This is for you. There are letters inside for you.”

“Thank you.” I run my hand over the smooth, supple pelt.

“I am sorry. I cannot stay. But Foster will come tomorrow night.”

I retrieve my stack of letters from the table and give them to Adam. As he jumps into the air, I latch the door closed, muscles searing and head pounding from exertion, yet proud of my progress. Pouring water into a cup, I hate to admit Terran may be right. I need purpose, some aim beyond myself. I smooth the black leather over the plane of the table. This may provide the means.

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Happy reading!
Tricia