

The
Wishing
Well

The Paradan Tales

Book 1

A Novel by Holly Zitting

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This book is dedicated to my parents.

Sandy and Allen and Brian and Bernice.

*Thank you for always supporting me and
loving me when I was my most, unlovable.*

*Also, for my brothers and sisters both by
blood and by love. My life is enriched each
day by having you in it.*

*And for anyone who is searching for their
happily ever after.....*

The Wishing Well

Prologue

I have always believed every wish each held a great deal of power.

As a little girl I used to wait up at night then I would look out my window in search of the first evening star. Then, with all the faith and hope in me, I would make my wish. Holding tight onto the golden coin in my hand it grew heavier and heavier in my cold and sweaty palm. My wish joined with it. I would drop it deep into the dark abyss of the wishing well, knowing it would change the direction of my destiny. My forever.

I looked up into the icy eyes which spoke deep into my heart.

I longed for him to stop me. There was a growing circle of mythical creatures starting to surround me. I had come to love them as my family. I couldn't believe I was about to leave them all. I willed the solid gold coin in my hand to disappear into thin air, and then I would never have to make this

impossible wish. Stepping closer to the well and looking down at the seemingly endless hole in the earth— I braced myself.

Closing my eyes, I held the coin close to my lips and whispered quietly to myself “I wish— to go home.”

The coin dropped quickly out of my hand and into the chilling darkness. It burned my fingers as it left them. Afraid this was going to be the last moment I saw them I looked into the eyes of the boy I loved. Focusing on him, trying to remember every inch of the love I would soon lose. It has been said “Be careful what you wish for, it just might come true.” As much as I knew how true those words were, it would never stop me from wishing.

Chapter 1

The Wishing Well

I could hear them following me.

All I could think was not here, *not now*. I dealt with my growing gang of tormentors enough at school. Now they were following me to my sanctuary. Tears threatened to spill over my anxious eyes. There weren't many places I could hide anymore. The last time I encountered them on my own, I had ended up with bruises and a large cut to my arm. A fading scar on my left arm was a constant reminder of that day. My parents had done all they could to protect me. The principal had even called in the police on more than one occasion. This only fed their hatred. No one could ever give me a reason why they were constantly after me. My parents thought they were jealous. My denials only prompted my parents into telling me how I never saw myself the way they did.

I would never understand.

By worldly standards I was considered a beauty.

My hair was almost to my waist. It was chestnut brown with auburn highlights. I had finally grown out of my baby fat stage, as my mom liked to call it. Thankfully I no longer had to listen to her solicit constant helpful tips on how to lose those extra few unwanted pounds. She always wanted me to try some crazy diet with her. I had grown almost 8 inches in the past year. I was five foot seven and still growing. My body was long and lean thanks to my new addiction to running. My eyes are the color of the Caribbean ocean on a sunny day.

Looking in the mirror, they were my favorite part of my reflection.

I had always been active in student government. However, lately one of my favorite things at school was working with the kids with special needs. There was a special program where they taught life skills to kids. I was the student who was in charge. It was there where I spent the bulk of my after school time. Being around those without a voice . . . I could relate to how they felt, like right now. My voice was caught behind the lump in my throat. I was rushing and my lungs were starting to rebel.

The top of the clearing was quickly approaching.

It was a pretty barren hill. Rounding at the top and then heading back down there wasn't much to see with the exception of a large wishing well. It sat right smack dab in the middle of the hill; you could see 360 degrees from it. I had sent many wishes down into the ebony abyss hoping they would someday come true. The only wish I needed answered right now was for me to disappear.

I searched for a hiding spot.

Even though I had been to the top of this hill a hundred times I prayed something new would magically materialize. Luck didn't seem to be on my side today. One reason I loved this hill is because it sat high up. You could see the whole valley from up here. I could spend hours sitting up against the wishing well. Either I would read or just daydream.

The well itself had seen better days.

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It had been here longer than the town. It had been built out of broken gray mortar bricks. Early settlers had built it to christen and bless the land. They had been extremely superstitious, so they built it before harvesting a single tree. Dis-use and no one taking the time to repair the damage over the years had started to show. Grass grew between the cracks; moss was starting to cover most of the bricks. Once out of curiosity I had tried to use the hand crank to see if it still worked.

It was frozen in place but I could see the bucket was still intact not far from the rim.

It was larger than a normal bucket and square in shape. The sounds of their rough shuffling footsteps were getting louder. I could hear them gasping for breath. This trip up the hill was easy for me. I did it often, sometimes more than once a day. I could walk it in my sleep. Without taking a second to think about it, I climbed up and over into the wishing well. My legs worked their way into the large bucket and I held on for dear life.

Every inch of me was quivering. I had to hold my mouth shut to soften the sounds of my teeth rocking together. *Could they hear the pounding of my heart?*

“Where did she go?” An angry, venom filled voice barked.

“You said she came up this hill__” a male voice shook with contention.

“Are you joking? I’m going home. This is ridiculous__ Come on, Taos,” a whiny voice cried.

Murmuring and complaints along with swearing echoed down the hillside. My legs were scraped and bloody. Forced into the small space my muscles were so tense they complained under the strain.

How long was long enough?

Did I dare move?

Would I be safe if I left my haven? My heart still thudded like it was trying to keep pace with a jack-hammer. My lungs burned. It was then I realized that I had stopped breathing. Slowly exhaling I tried to be as quiet as possible.

Time passed.

My breathing and heartbeat slowed. It was getting dark and I realized just how long I had been in the tight space. It had been long enough for them to make their way down the mountain so I gripped the edges of the bucket and proceeded to push myself up. With one hand I reached for the edge of the wishing well. The stone crumbled and I started to slip. Panic sets in.

Shuffling my hands to try to regain my balance, the bucket creaked and groaned in protest. I could feel it weakening. My only thought was please, *no*__

Then. . . . I fell.

Chapter 2

I wanted to scream.

The sound was stuck in the back of my throat. It was fighting to escape. My brain disconnected from my voice box, while the connections to my hands weren't working any better. With every breath my already ravaged and bleeding fingers were desperate to find a hold along the ragged rocks.

I prepared myself to hit the bottom.

Everyone says your life flashes through your mind when you're preparing to die. Maybe it is a reminder of all the good and bad moments in your life. That wasn't happening. Instead I saw what I wanted to do with my future. Every little girl wants to find her prince charming and fall in love. I saw

myself walking down an aisle with a man who I didn't know yet, but dreamt of often. Another image taunting me was of myself with a lap full of children.

My children.

I wanted to be a mom someday. More than I wanted to be anything else, *I wanted to be a mom.* Reality hit me I was still falling. This shouldn't be possible. My body should be broken in a hundred pieces by now. The air around me was no longer heated. It was turning cooler and icy.

I shivered.

Wrapping my arms around myself trying to comfort and warm at the same time. Finally after what felt like an eternity the bottom seemed to be approaching. Light_ It was dim, but I could just make out the subtle shift in the well. What had been round and long was now turning into something narrow and cone shaped.

I was running out of space.

Terror overtook me and I blacked out.

Chapter 3

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I woke up to what had to be a dream.

There was someone or something standing over me. I was guessing it was male, and he looked more scared of me than I was of him. The only way I could properly describe him was *hideous*. He was covered in black hair or fur. I wasn't sure. Something made my stomach heave—his face. A flattened pushed up nose reminded me of a wild boar. Each of his eyes were large and misshapen. They looked cold and dark staring down at me while he—*sarled at me*. Long pointed snagged teeth jettied out of his oversized mouth. His ears were half the size of his head and came to large points at the top.

Burlap seemed to be the fabric of his choice with the exception of a metal vest. It looked like he had made it himself. It had been put together from random pieces of leftover scraps. I wondered if it was decorative or if he used it as armor? *He seemed to be terrified*. There was fear dancing in his eyes. *What could he have to fear?*

"Why are you here?" He sneered, freakishly. Looking at me quizzically, my lips were frozen in place. I wasn't even sure where HERE was. Terror still seized my body.

"Fine. I will take you to King Tommit. He will find out what you have been up too."

Did I hear him right? King?

He picked me up with only one hand it was as if I weighed nothing. He smelled like rotting meat. My dad stood at six feet five inches and he was taller than him. My head was spinning and I was on the verge of throwing up. My eyes were closed trying to fight the panic growing in my stomach.

The fear must have won out, because I was once again in the darkness.

I thanked the universe for small favors.

*

He dropped like a hot potato.

My already sore and damaged body groaned in protest. I tried biting my lower lip and not allowing a single sound to escape. Fear and confusion had etched their way into the furrows of my face. Looking around, I would have to guess I was in some sort of throne room. It was massive; you could have fit a football field in the room. White marble walls and floors shined like someone had just polished them. Heavy red curtains hung, on either side of the double windows, they were the length of each wall. There were lots of glaring angry stares directed in my way. Being alone with my tormentors would have been preferable to this.

What were they waiting for?

My heart was pounding. My skin trembled with terror.

Horns sounded.

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Everyone turned to the origin of the sound. The guards marched toward us. They were surrounding someone. It was hard to see who it was, because of their uniform caps towered over them. Each of the guards were dressed in rich gold's and reds. Crimson red pants which ended with shiny lace up black boots. Their shirts were the same red on their back and arms. The fronts of their shirts were gold and were accented by two rows of golden buttons.

Each one wore a hat reminding me of the guards at Buckingham Palace, except they were gold and metal. In each of their hands, they held were shiny, sharp steel spears.

They marched in perfect rhythm. Making their way to the over opulent throne. It appeared to be carved from a single piece of gold. Then, someone who had zero restraint bedazzled almost every inch of it.

It was ghastly and beautiful at the same time.

The guards parted and then at once turned around to face me. By the looks on their faces you would think I was the most dangerous creature they had ever come in contact with. After seeing the snarling beast that dragged me here, I wondered how that was even possible. With great trepidation three guards stepped left while the other three stepped right.

Sitting on the throne was the man they had been hiding.

He had wavy dirty blonde hair that hung to the nape of his neck. It had streaks of black underneath threatening to peek out. His eyes were the color of coal; they were starkly contrasted by his translucent milky white skin. I guessed he was somewhere in his late twenty's, but it was hard to tell. He was dressed in all black, black slip on boots, black leggings, which all led to a black silk button up shirt. A dark blood red cape rested on his shoulders. Sitting on top of his head, was a golden crown. Whoever had bejeweled the throne had gotten their hot little hands on the crown, too. It was gaudy at best, but it was all overpowered by his smugness.

"Who, have you brought this time, Cronan?" His question was addressed to my captor.

"I caught it," he raised his awful nose at me, "trying to sneak into Paradan."

Sneak? Paradan?

I forced my mouth to stay shut. My mind was still half convinced I was dreaming. The King considered his words for a brief moment. Anger grew around his eyes, his fists clenched in fury. He jumped out of his seat in a rage.

"You're from Fara_ King Calas sent you here to spy on me didn't he_?" He was standing shaking those furious fists at me. I was more lost than before if that was possible. Shaking my head no in reply, the tears finally started breaking free.

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“And, just what are you wearing_” I looked down at my clothes. I was wearing simple dark blue jeans and a purple shirt.

“I would think that King Calas would at least have a little something in that huge head of his to work with. Take her out of my sight and put her to work with the maids. You will have the rest of your miserable life to see my glory up close.” He laughed and others in the room joined in.

I tried pinching myself willing my eyes to open and for me to be at home in my bed.

When they opened I was surrounded by the over dressed guards. One of them picked me up. I started kicking and fighting back. They just laughed. Another one grabbed my legs with ease dragging me thru the opulent hallways.

Fear had overtaken my body in such a way my nerves felt as if they were on fire. Everywhere they touched me, felt like my skin was blistering. *I wanted to go home. I wanted far, far away from this fairy tale nightmare.*

I couldn't believe how big this place was.

It reminded me of a long forgotten labyrinth. Trying to escape wasn't going to be easy. Looking back in the direction we had come I couldn't even remember our path. We went further into the recesses of the pit of the castle. After ten more minutes they stopped suddenly. My eyes searched for our ending.

The door in front of us looked just like all of the others.

What was so special about this one?

One of the guards knocked loudly. I could hear quiet sounds coming forward. The door slowly opened.

“Yes.”

The childlike voice which responded was connected to a small girl. Her hair was fiery red and curled in ringlets all over her tiny head. It hung down to her waist. Her bright emerald green eyes sparkled. It seemed as if her porcelain body had been sprinkled with rainbow glitter. Her features were smaller than normal, but years of wisdom filled her face. She was wearing a long black gown. It reminded me of the plays I had seen of Romeo and Juliet. It had a sweetheart neckline with long open sleeves. A simple white apron topped her dress, but her dress wasn't what I was staring at. My eyes were frozen on her *WINGS_*

They were on her back and still. As she was walking, I wondered why she wasn't using them. They were beautifully translucent, gossamer and so delicate.

“Evver, we have a new member of the staff for you. Dress her and then get her to work.” She looked at me sadly.

“Yes, Rikon.”

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The guards pushed me toward her. She reached out and took my shaking hands. Evver guided me thru the door and then quickly shut it. Walking me over to her bed it was a small cot. Her “room” was more of a storage closet. Uniforms and cleaning supplies were stacked to the ceiling. She sensed the fear that was still cursing thru my blood. Stepping back, she gave me a moment to take it all in. Even though she wasn’t using her wings, her movements were still extremely graceful.

“Why don’t we get you cleaned up and changed?” Her voice was so gentle, so calming. Looking into her anxious eyes I could see she wouldn’t hurt me. So, I nodded in assent. In no time flat she had me dressed and my wounds bandaged and cleaned. She hummed a lovely melody while she worked. When I had been dropped into this massive castle, I never expected to find a moment of tranquility. Was it just a mirage? I wasn’t sure. There were so many questions in my heart and mind, but I was too afraid to ask any of them.

After looking me over she seemed pleased with the results.

“Why don’t we get something in your stomach before we start?” My stomach grumbled in reply. Smiling at me, she led the way. I tried to pay attention to our route, but I was beginning to think they were purposefully trying to confuse me with the different ways they were taking me. Walking into the kitchen, I was shocked. It was no bigger than my family room at home. The walls were worn and it appeared the kitchen went mostly ignored by the King and his guards.

On the far wall was a large fireplace.

It took up most of the wall, and there were pots boiling on the stove top and in another part of the oven, there was bread baking. Everything was being heated by firewood. I looked around to see candles around the room on the walls, tables, and in every corner. There was no power.

Where was P?

Evver, sliced me some bread and cheese and then added some fresh fruit. I made sure she ate before me. My teeth sunk deep into the warm, thick and delicious bread. I was too wrapped up in the food to focus on the sad glances my way. Most were human but a few were fairies like Evver. Just like her, they all walked__ None of them flew. I would later learn it was because King Tommit had their wings clipped. During my second piece of bread we had another visitor.

He was enormous__

Both of his hands were filled with firewood. A gigantic smile played along the lines of his lips. Caught up with talking to the others he didn't notice my prying eyes. He was laughing and joking as if he enjoyed his time here. For someone so large, he had a childlike demeanor. He reminded me of my friends' four year old little brothers.

"Kazor we have a new friend." The giant's eyebrows rose. Slowly turning himself around his eyes met mine. They were kind and trusting. Nothing like I was expecting.

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"Hello," his voice shook the pans on the wall. I forced a smile.

"She doesn't speak." Evver offered, while the another fairy, walked up and patted the giant on the arm. He looked hurt. Kazor's bottom lip started to rise into a pout. His eyes were shining like he was getting ready to cry.

"Why don't we give her a little time? You remember your first night here don't you?" He nodded sadly. Opening his mouth as if he wanted to say something more, but thinking against it. Hanging his head down, he turned and left the room. Tears dropped on the table.

I felt gentle pressure on my hand. It was Evver.

"It's okay. Don't let his size fool you, Kazor is only a child. Between the age's three or four we aren't really sure. He loves new friends and he is finally settling in. Part of him has forgotten just how scary it is, *but I remember.*" Her normally sparkling eyes clouded over. I could tell she was remembering something which brought her great pain. I didn't have many friends, *none actually.* It was easier to watch me be bullied from the sidelines. Anyone who had attempted to stop my torments was then added to the list of people whose lives needed destroyed.

I didn't blame them.

It was easier for me to be alone. Yet looking at Evver now and seeing her pain made me want to be there for her. My empty hand covered hers. I tried to make the words escape my lips but failed miserably. I was certain my body was still in shock. She smiled at me, touched I had tried.

“It’s fine. It was another lifetime ago. Maybe sometime I will tell you the story. Right now it’s time to get to work. Stay near me and I will show you what to do.” I nodded and quickly followed her.

*

At the end of the day my whole body ached.

I was already sore from my tumble down the well. Now, after hours of scrubbing floors my hands and knees were bleeding. Once again Evver bandaged me. Then she let me take her cot while she slept on the floor. I had only known her a few hours and I already felt closer to her than anyone in my life. Whatever I did while I was here I had to help her, the others too. In the short time I spent with them I had been given a tiny glimpse in their hearts. It was clear they were all here against their wills. *Just like me.*

My dreams were terrifying and violent.

I awoke gasping for breath.

Expecting to wake up in the warmth of my own room my heart crashed when I opened my eyes to Evver. Her worried, misty eyes found mine. Dark circles formed around her normally clear eyes.

“Good morning. I hope you got some rest. We need to dress and eat. Then we need to get started for the day. I will explain more later,” I forced myself to comply. Looking at her eyes I could see she was

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worried about me. It was obvious she hadn't slept well. Feeling bad about that, I climbed up quickly and vowed to do better today. By the end of the day, my body trembled with exhaustion.

I had worked hard in my life but never anything like this. Only able to eat a few bites of dinner before I fell asleep. My head was resting on the hard carved wooden table. I awoke hours later and found myself snuggled deep in a real bed. The mattress was made of feathers probably from a golden goose. It was the softest thing I had ever felt. Evver was gone and there was no one else in the room with me. There was light coming from down the hallway. Peeking around the corner I couldn't help but be curious. Following the dim light, the more steps I took the brighter it grew. It led me back towards the kitchen. Sitting at the table was Evver, Reber, another fairy, and a boy I didn't know.

My feet froze in my tracks.

Sitting on the end of the table was the most beautiful creature I had ever laid eyes on. He was human and breathtaking. Dark walnut locks fell over his dazzling blue eyes. They danced in the candlelight. He looked upset. I wanted to reach out and smooth the furrows on his perfect brow. It was hard to see what he was wearing, by the position he was seated in. Sitting down he had his hands linked together, as if he was praying. I wanted a closer look.

Inching nearer, I wondered what had him so upset. My body was still weak from exhaustion and my ninja skills were seriously lacking. My legs gave out and I toppled over and fell in the doorway. They all

jumped up to come to my rescue. Thankfully the only thing hurt was my pride. I flushed with embarrassment. I tried to pull myself up. A strong hand reached out to help me up—taking it in mine without realizing just who, it belonged to. The touch was electric. It sent charges into my dormant heart. Looking up his gaze was locked on mine.

He smiled at me.

His eyes crinkled around the edges. Warmth emitted from his features. Something in the back of my mind told me that this was an important moment for me.

“Are you alright?” His velvet voice rang in my ears. I nodded. “Come sit down,” his hand remained entwined in mine. His remaining arm wrapped around my frame to steady me. He led me to the table and chose the seat next to me. My hand felt a sting of pain when he released it. Concern tugged at his eyes.

“I heard we had a new addition. My name’s Cassius. I work here in the stables taking care of the Kings’ animals.” He could have told me he was from the moon and he played with Martians and it wouldn’t have made a difference. “What’s your name?”

Evver started to respond for me but my mouth had a mind of its own.

“Aurora.” His eyes widened at my voice while Evver smiled at hearing my first word since I arrived. I was still surprised that my brain had allowed a word to escape.

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"Aurora," his lips played with each letter of my name. It did strange and unexpected things to my rushing heart. "Welcome to the family." My eyes widened. Confusion must have been covering my features. *Family?* Evver put her hand ever so gently on Cassius's shoulder.

I felt a sudden and painful jab of jealousy strike my stomach.

"I haven't had time to tell her our stories yet." My heart sunk at her use of the word "*our*". It was ridiculous the way this boy was affecting me. Understanding rang in his face.

"Are you tired? Or could you hear a story or two?" I was wide awake after his touch.

"Yes, please." That was better, two words this time. He smiled warmly at the sound of my voice.

"Evver, do you want to go first?" He asked, being the gentleman I knew he was.

"No Cas, why don't you go first?" She smiled lovingly at him. He returned the look of love. I was surprised at just how much it hurt.

"Sure. First, Aurora can you tell us where you are from? It might make things easier to explain." I panicked. If I told them the truth, they would think I was crazy. Fear surged thru my pumping blood, imagining where crazy people were carted off to here. Deciding to keep it simple—I was a terrible liar. Even though I had just met Cassius, I was certain the deceit would ring in his ears.

"I was being chased. I was trying to hide from a group of thugs chasing after me." Fear edged my voice thinking of it again. I tried to remain calm. "I fell down and woke up in Para . . ."

“Paradan,” Evver finished for me.

“Yes,” my eyes searched theirs for answers.

“How about a little history lesson first?” I nodded grateful for any information to fill in the many blanks. “Paradan used to be a wonderful, glorious and strong country. We were well respected by the outer lying kingdoms. King Windom was a great leader, a beloved king. He was kind, loving, and merciful to all. We all lived together; humans, fairies, giants, trolls, dwarves and even the dragons.” My eyes widened at the mention of all the mythical creatures. He laughed.

“King Windom died suddenly. He wasn’t married and there was no heir to claim the throne. Chaos ensued. King Tommit showed up and appeared to be honest at first. Most were thankful. He promised to put our kingdom back in order. He promised peace and prosperity for everyone and everything living in Paradan.” His eyes darkened at the memory. Cassius’ hands twisted into angry fists reliving the moment.

I wanted to reach out and comfort him.

“Suddenly there were rumors of unexplained fires. Houses were being burned. Entire rows were gone overnight. King Tommit always seemed incredibly distraught by the heinous events. He would graciously step in and find the occupants new homes. But they were always far, far away from where they had lived originally. Still they were grateful to have a roof over their heads and somewhere safe to live. It wasn’t until it was too late that people realized they were all being herded. Soon the neighborhoods were

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empty of everyone—except humans. People started an uprising. This is when the Kings’ Destroyers moved in.”

I had stopped breathing. I let the air out quietly. Evver had huge tear drops falling down her tiny cheeks. Sometime during the story, Reber had gotten up and left. Cassius’ eyes were black as midnight.

The darkness they had experienced echoed in his eyes.

“If you spoke out, or fought back, you were either killed or brought to the castle for slave labor. Fairy wings were clipped. The giant’s parents were killed, only their very young children survived. All of the trolls were relocated from their precious truffle farms. And the dwarves? Well they were made to do the giants job of harvesting the beanstalks, a dangerous job previously done by the giants. It has been a very dark and troubling time, ever since. I was raised by fairies and giants. I never knew my human family, so seeing them treated this way. . . .” His voice disappeared for a moment.

A great deal of pain lingered in his brilliant blue eyes. They reminded me of home on a cloudless day. I wished there was a way I could take all of it away and make him forget it ever existed. I wasn’t sure why his pain had such an effect on me. Finding his voice, he continued.

“We all want to change things, but unless a true heir steps forward and is willing to *fight* to rejoin our country, then all will be lost. It’s good that Evver here got herself in trouble. At least now I can keep a closer eye on things at the Castle.”

She bowed deeply.

"Happy to be of service," a silly smile replaced the tearful stare.

"I am sorry, but why does Evver being in trouble help things?" I thought of the girl who had quickly become my friend. Knowing she would never fly again broke part of my spirit.

"After Evver was caught and forced to become one of King Tommit's slaves, *I had to do something*. I got hired on at the stables. Someone has to keep an eye out for her." The words were bittersweet to my pained soul.

"I am glad. It's scary here. I'm grateful you have someone looking over you." Meaning every word I spoke, to my new and only friend.

"Yes Cas, is the world's best big brother." She said, hugging his neck. I almost choked on my tongue when I heard those words.

"Brother?" I asked dumbfounded.

"Yes, my parents were the fairies that helped raise Cas."

"And I have been getting her out of trouble ever since." She half-heartedly hit his arm. My emotions were on a killer roller coaster. My heart, brain, and stomach were battling each other.

"How are you, Aurora? Do you need to take a break?" His concern touched me. Taking a deep breath, I was trying to control my breathing but failing miserably.

"I'm fine. It's just a lot to take in."

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"I could tell that you weren't from here," Evver piped quietly in. "The clothes you were wearing and the paint on your face and hands. Well . . . I didn't recognize any of it." Thinking of my attire it must have been so foreign to her. I looked down at my bright purple nails and saw how ravaged my manicure was after two days of scrubbing floors. Having sparkling nails didn't seem so important anymore.

"I admit, things are very different here." I paused, looking at the candle lit faces around the table. "But it's nice to have some friendly faces to look too."

"Aurora, you are not alone, not anymore." Cassius' words were like a gasoline to my already simmering fire. He reached over and put his hands on mine. The reaction was immediate and explosive. My entire body quivered, looking into his eyes I could see the electricity pass through him, as well.

The moment quickly passed when we heard a noise in the hallway.

They both jumped up and blew out the candles. Evver grabbed me and pulled me toward the large pantry. Her fingers found my lips, warning me to be silent. There were two sets of footsteps which passed our way. I'm not sure how long we stood there silently and in the dark. My mind and body were both warring with my ability to focus.

My body was still responding from Cassius' touch, while my mind was trying to figure out what was happening. *Why were they so afraid? Who had been in the hallway?* Finally a light appeared in the darkness. It was Cassius.

“Better get back to your rooms. I’ll see you both soon.” He slipped out the open door.

Evver took my hand and led me into the pitch darkness. Finally, arriving at the room where I had woken up earlier. She seemed to be able to see and led me straight to my awaiting bed. We sat in silence for several minutes before she quietly spoke.

“Sorry about that, but we can never let them know my connection to Cas. He is allowed away from the castle. If they found out they would lock him up or worse” The thought caught in her throat. It caused her great pain to try to voice it. Thinking about the possibility ripped layers off of my racing heart. *How could someone I just met, have such an immediate impact on me?*

“I understand. I promise I will never tell anyone.” My words calmed her.

“Thank you, Aurora. The only time we ever get to see each other is during the middle of the night. I hate being away from my family.” The pain which was etched into her words was immense. I thought about being away from my family and strangely it didn’t really bother me so much. My parents were always caught up in their jobs. I was an only child so I was home most of the time all alone. I wondered what it would be like to grow up with a large family. What would it be like to always have someone around, to have noise and laughter ringing throughout the house? To always have someone to talk to?

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"I'm so sorry, Evver. Have you thought about fighting back? It seems like no one is happy with the King?" Her eyes widened in terror. She started cowering in the corner of the room.

"NO_" Her voice was quiet but it quivered with fear.

"Ok, ok. Please, calm down." My hands tried to soothe her. My touch seemed to do the trick.

Her breathing slowed and the fear lessened in her tiny features.

"Thanks. It's nice to have a friend here. Everyone mainly sticks to themselves. I think the anxiety is getting to all of us. We have all seen and heard too many things that have changed us forever." Her eyes got a faraway look for a moment. Pain was set deep into her childlike features. "Sorry, I am rambling. We both better get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow." She went to stand and I grabbed her hand.

"Why don't you stay in here with me? This bed is big enough for both of us." I couldn't stand the thought of my new friend sleeping on the hard cot or worse the floor again. Tears touched her eyes, for the briefest of moments.

"Sure," she said with a relieved smile.

I lay down and she lay down next to me. Her body twisted in a way where she wasn't laying on her wings. Her breathing became smooth and gentle in moments. She was exhausted. I wondered how long it had been since she slept on a real bed. Cassius face and his words of the story he had told me took turns consuming my thoughts.

I wasn't sure how, but eventually I fell asleep.

My dreams were of the boy with the blue eyes and of wishing wells.

Chapter 4

The next few days went by uneventfully.

It was the same routine every day. Each day Evver got more comfortable with me. She would sleep with me every night. It felt like I had a new little sister to take care of. *I liked it.* At the end of one exhausting day we were sitting on my bed. I was trying not to fall asleep and she was reading a book.

“Aurora? Are you still awake?” Her voice brought me out of the slumber for which my body longed for.

“Yes.”

“I want to tell you my story.” *Now I was wide awake.* After hearing Cassius talk, I had wondered just how Evver had been brought into custody. “I was young when Tommit took the throne. I didn’t understand why everyone was so happy. King Windom was wonderful. He loved the kingdom’s children. It didn’t matter what type of children, fairy, troll, giant, dwarf or human. There was never a moment he

looked at us differently. I never saw the difference until Tommit took over. You have to realize I was growing up with a human brother. It was normal for me. One of my teachers was a giant. My babysitter was a troll." My eyes widened at her words.

She laughed at my incredulous look.

"Yes, I am guessing the only trolls you have seen were less than lovable." Shaking my head in agreement, she smiled. "Terax may have looked hard on the outside, but she was wonderful. She had been with my family since I was born. Her father was a troll and her mother a human. So her features weren't as defined as most. She had long black hair hung that down her back. Her face was more human than troll. But her ears gave her away. Her eyes were always filled with tender kindness and she was so gentle to everyone with whom she came in contact. Like everyone else of mixed families she was banished when Tommit began moving people.

Unlike the others they didn't know where to send her. They didn't want her with the humans. It was decided they were going to send her to the trolls, at the last minute Zieg changed his mind. He decided to send her to the castle. She was dragged from our home. I was the only one at home with her at the time. She fought and fought. Terax was terrified what would become of me if I was left alone. Zieg used his club and hit her hard in the face. She dropped down to the ground and" Evver was

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reliving the moment. Her tiny hands were in tight balls of grief. The agony of the moment was forever seared into her heart.

I reached out to comfort her. My touch brought her back.

“I was so frightened. They left me alone. I was only four and to be all alone was scary enough but to see someone I loved hurt in such a way it was pure torture. My father arrived with Cassius a few hours later. They returned to find the door broken and blood in the front room. I was hiding in a shed in the backyard. I was under piles of hay. Each of them was terrified of what had occurred while they were off looking for food. My father started calling out for me. They searched the house and the area around it. They even checked with our neighbors and then—Cas found me. It was one of my hiding spots where only he had ever found me. He carried me into the house and it was days before I was able to tell them the story. My family was terrified. Cassius was sent to the west, to the Pater’s family. They are the giant’s family he told you about. Most of them had been hearing murmurings about giant adults going missing. So, they sent Cassius and Abow, their one year old son, to a family cabin in the fairy forest. Abow was about the size of a full grown man at the time, so he was still easy to conceal.” She paused and remembered the darkness of the moment. I thought about all the pain my friend had survived.

It made my bullying seem like nothing.

“Not long after they left the uprisings began. I was sent to stay with them as was my sister Ember. She was ten years old at the time. Our parents thought we would be safer with Cassius. They were right of course. No one was prepared for Tommit’s Destroyers. It was like they knew everyone’s every step before they took it. They were waiting ready to take down anyone and everyone who would dare stand up to Tommit. The Pater’s disappeared. We still don’t know what happened to them. My father —well he managed to escape with a deep wound to his thigh. Mama and I tried to save him.” Tears were starting to fall. I reached out and pulled her to me. Hugging her and wishing I could erase her pain. She cried until her tears were dry.

“I am so sorry, Evver.” My eyes were far from dry now. We sat in silence for what seemed like an hour. I almost wondered if she had fallen asleep when she finally spoke again.

“After that, Mama was a shell of who she had been. It was like she was living in a nightmare. Her beloved was dead and her children were in hiding. I don’t know how she ever survived it. Cassius, Ember and I were so worried about her. She went to live with her sister Aria. They were hiding deep in the beanstalk forest last anyone told me. One day, Cas went out to search for some food. He left the rest of us to watch over each other. Abow had been up most of the night before, crying. He would look like a man to you, but he was still just a young child. All he wanted was his mother and father. Ember had been up with him, so they were both exhausted. They were sleeping and I snuck out. I wanted to find my mother. It was stupid and reckless. I made it as far as the crossing at the troll bridge. *It was a trap.* They had one

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of their scavengers waiting underneath, just waiting to bring their prize to Tommit. It cost me my wings, but I wouldn't tell them where I had been. I couldn't do that to my family. So, I paid the price. I never cried, not even when they clipped my wings. I figured it was my punishment for endangering my family.

I was terrified that Cassius would come looking for me and he, too, would be enslaved. He figured out I had been taken, but he was smart about it. Cassius always was good at thinking on his feet. He heard King Tommit was looking for someone to work in the stables. Growing up he could always work with any animal you put in front of him. So he showed up and after they saw him working with Darant, King Tommit's prize Pegasus, they offered him the job. He had the full run of the castle grounds. Just like any *caring* big brother, he searched every inch of them. He had been here over a week and still hadn't found me. Then, he started sneaking into the castle at night. After three weeks he finally found me. I still don't know how he managed to stay hidden all of that time.

Cassius' feelings were mixed when he found me. He was thrilled, but then he realized I had my wings clipped—it was one of the few times I had ever seen him cry. It took all of my will to convince him it was too dangerous for him to spirit me away from the castle that very night. Finally he realized how much I was safer here. If I ran and was caught then—well, there are no second chances with King Tommit. I would be brought in front of him and immediately killed. Cassius wasn't willing to take that chance, so I stayed.”

My mind was spinning.

I knew that Tommit had only been in power a few years. So much had happened in such a short time. I felt sick both physically and mentally Evver had been thru so much in her life. I felt a great empathy for her. I wanted to somehow fix it all. *How could I?* A thought that continually played through my mind made an appearance once again.

“Evver? How old are you?” She looked at me and smiled.

“I thought I had told you, I’m eight years old.” I felt like I had been gut punched.

“Eight?” She was so young. It was hard to tell with fairies, they were all so tiny.

“Yes. Why?” I couldn’t tell her the thoughts which were torturing my mind. I forced a smile unsure if she could see my face in the darkened room. The candle had gone out during her story and I was too entrenched in it to light a new one.

“Just wondering. . . it’s just, well, I thought fairies had powers? Like fairy dust? It’s ok to laugh.”

She did. All I could picture was Tinker Bell and Pixie Hollow.

“Fairies used to have powers. It’s been almost a hundred years since they disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” How could powers just disappear?

“No one knows for sure what happened to the fairy powers. There used to be a golden gem that fed the fairies’ their powers. There has never been another one. It was hidden deep in the fairy forest. It

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supplied the fairies of their power and kept them safe from others preying upon them. Then one day it was gone. To this day, it remains a mystery to this day why our powers remain missing." I could tell it made her sad just thinking about it. So I asked another question I had been curious about.

"So, Cassius is eighteen?" She grinned at me.

"Almost. Actually, he has three more weeks until he turns eighteen. How old are you, Aurora?"

"Seventeen. My birthday is January twenty-third."

"January? What's January?" I almost laughed at her question. *How could she not know what January was?* Then, I was once again reminded that I wasn't in my world anymore.

"Um January is the first month of the year where I come from. It's October now at my home." I could imagine the strange look that must be dancing in her eyes. I continued to forget just how foreign my world must be to her, probably more so than Paradan was to me.

"Oh. Right now, we are in the tenth rime, if that helps at all." I wanted to tell her I was even more confused now than I was before, but I just smiled and said yes. Evver curled up to me and laid her head on my stomach. Her breathing slowed and before I had time to think about it she was fast asleep. The more I learned about Evver, Cassius and Paradan the more I was beginning to believe I was meant to end up here. Maybe I could do something to change the torment they were all experiencing. I had never been very brave growing up. Meeting Evver had awakened something primal in me. In school we had read

about a mother bear that'd been shot eight times but she was still able to fight off the poachers until her babies were safe. The moment her cubs were safely tucked in their den she dropped dead from her injuries. Right now, I wanted to be that mama bear for Evver. She slept fitfully all night. I have to admit I watched her sleep most of the night worrying what her life was going to become.

*

The next evening we were back in the kitchen seated around the table.

Tonight it has just been Evver, Reber and me. Reber stayed for a while and then headed for bed.

We were about to do the same when the door opened. Standing there with raindrops dancing in his ebony hair was Cassius. He wore a mischievous smile which was contagious. My heart leapt.

"Good evening." I was having a hard time not staring. He was wearing dark brown suede riding pants and an off-white shirt that showed his muscular frame. His eyes were shining bright in the candlelight. My heart raced as his gaze fell on me.

"Cas_" Evver jumped up and ran into his awaiting arms. She squealed with delight as he picked her up and spun her around. It was impossible not to join in the laughter. He carried her over to the table and seated her back in her seat with tender care. I loved the way that he treated her. As if she was his favorite person on the planet.

My skin warmed a few degrees when he sat next to me.

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"It's good to see you again Aurora." The way he said my name made it hard to remember how to speak clearly. So I just smiled. "So are you ready to call it a night? Or would you like to go for a walk?" I looked at Evver she wore the look of a conspirator.

"A walk?" It sounded exciting and dangerous at the same time. "In the castle?"

He laughed. "No, I'm talking about going outside. It's a full moon tonight. We figure it's time you see this kingdom you keep hearing so much about." I wondered when he had been talking to Evver about me. The thought of his lips uttering my name sent chills through me. I liked it. *But leaving the castle?* I wasn't sure being out in the open for someone to find us, was such a great idea.

"Isn't that dangerous?" Fear quickened my heart rate. He smiled at my obvious nerves reached out to hold my trembling hand.

"I will keep you safe Aurora. I would never let anyone hurt you." My chest burned with his voice. His icy eyes bore into me. They looked both fierce and tender. I believed him. There was a part of me that believed if a dragon charged at me he would be right there with his sword raised. *The thought made me smile.*

"Yes_" Evver jumped up and rushed into the pantry. She appeared, a few moments later, with something dark emerald in color.

"You will need this," I took it out of her tiny hands.

The fabric was silken and looked like someone had put a lot of time and effort into making it. The stitches were so tiny. It reminded me of the cape that Red Riding Hood wore. There was a large open hood to protect my head from the elements or prying eyes. It was just my length as if it was specially made for me. Open holes where my arms fit and side pockets for my hands to rest in. I had never seen anything so stunning. It took my breath from me.

“I hope you like it.” Evver’s voice was timid but there was great pride in her eyes.

“Evver, did you make this?” Her porcelain skin flushed red. She nodded.

“Thank you.”

“Here, let me help you.” Cassius’s strong hands took the delicate cape and helped me into it. It made me want to twirl like a little girl. I felt beautiful. I stepped forward and hugged her. She felt so tiny in my arms.

“Thank you, Evver. It’s beautiful. I love it_”

Stepping back, her eyes were glowing with love. Cassius reached his hand out, offering it to me. My hand was trembling as I placed it in his. The second our skin touched, my tremors subsided. He led me out the door. It was the first time I had set foot out of the castle since the foul-smelling troll had dragged me in here. As my feet touched the cobblestones, I was struck by how bright the night stars glowed. They were like twinkling lights on a Christmas tree, only brighter lighting our way in the murky

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night. My emotions were overwhelmed by all of the sights. Most of the buildings in the town-square looked as if they had been carved out of a single enormous boulder. Cobblestone walkways welcomed your every step. Large black wrought iron lanterns hung about every eight feet.

The walkways were lit by huge candles, inviting us in. Cassius pointed out some of his favorite places. A book store, he loved to read as much as I did. The bakery which smelled like freshly baked bread and cinnamon. I forgot I was supposed to be locked away in the castle. Any thoughts of being imprisoned in a castle in a land far, far, away from my real life were gone. Spending time with Cassius felt as more real to me than anything ever had.

I was lost in my time with him.

We walked around for about a half an hour. He stopped at a walk bridge, which traveled over a large flowing river, when he pulled me until we were in the middle of the bridge.

“This is what I wanted to show you.” He gestured down toward the water. You could see the reflection of the stars and the full moon. It was breathtaking. I could have stared at it all night if I wasn’t standing so close to Cassius.

“This spot is really special to me. It all started for me here. My mother found me here when she was on her way home one night.” My shock was poorly covered. “It’s alright. I have lived a good life. I have gotten to see what it was like to be more than—human. Most of the human’s, gave up easily when

Tommit came to power. They all lived a comfortable life and most didn't want to change it by fighting back. My ruse only works for as long as I am willing to put up with Tommit's doings. There will come a time where it will be too much and I will fight back." I hated the thought of him fighting anyone. I would have died if anything happened to him. My heart would never recover I was certain.

"My parents were wonderful. I was very blessed that they found me."

"Were? I thought your mother was still alive but in hiding?" I blurted it out without thinking first.

The grief that touched his eyes was painful to watch.

"I can't be sure, but there has been no word from my mother in over a year. You have to understand, Aurora. She loved my father and all of us more than her own life. I fear it was her love for us that may have driven her out of hiding. My heart aches thinking of a future where she may really be gone forever."

I reached out to take both of his hands.

"I am so sorry, Cassius. It's not fair for you, Evver and the rest of the kingdom has to suffer because of a big bully." My furrow creased and my blood pressure started to rise. He smiled at me. With his right hand he reached over and brushed away the hair from my eyes. Our heads started to lean into each other when he stiffened.

"Quick, we have to go."

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I didn't even have a second to think it over I was being pulled down the bridge behind him. We ran faster than I thought was humanly possible in my huge dress. Rushing thru the townsquare, we hid in the shadows whenever Cassius heard an unusual sound. I could see he was concerned, but he stayed calm trying not to frighten me. We made it back to the castle in record time. Instead of going in the kitchen, he led me to a new doorway. I trusted Cassius with my life, so I followed him.

Continuing to hold my hand he led me thru the corridors. I thought I was beginning to know the castle by now, but he was proving me wrong. In less than ten minutes he was opening the door to my bedroom. I was still so turned around. It was pitch dark not even the light from the full moon touched my room. My heart was racing. I was trying to catch my breath. Cassius's chest was heaving. We waited quietly for a minute. When he was sure we were safe he took his hand and caressed my cheek. Leaning over he kissed my forehead.

"Sweet dreams," and slipped out the door.

*

I gently took off the beautiful cape that Evver had made me.

Folding it gently, I hid it under my mattress. I didn't want anyone to find it. Lying down, my body was exhausted, but my mind and heart remained on fire. The thought of our near kiss and his tender touch were still fresh in my mind.

The skin still tingled where his lips had touched me.

Morning would come sooner than I was prepared for and I wanted to savor every moment I had spent with Cassius. I drifted into a peaceful sleep, with my heart focused on the boy with frosty blue eyes which warmed me to the bone.

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Chapter 5

I woke up to another sunrise.

The roosters still slept, yet I was already up and cleaning the castle floors. Today I was tasked with cleaning the south wing. Scrubbing floors once again until my hands bled. I was used to this by now; the pain was just another part of my daily grind. Today I was on my own. Evver was training someone new.

Another fairy had been captured. *Her crime you might ask?*

Her name is Shia and she was searching for food for her young children.

Her husband had been killed in the later uprisings. Shia was told she was unable to be hired for any labor, because her husband had fought against Tommit. So, she was now considered a threat to the throne. In desperation she started scavenging for food for her tiny family. You could hear her cries thru out the castle when her wings were clipped.

She was inconsolable.

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Not for herself but for her children. Hidden deep in the fairy forest they would never know what had happened to her. All alone with no one to care for them, she worried for their lives.

Evver promised she would have a friend go to them and bring them to a safe home. Only after much reassurance, she calmed. In a way it was easier to be alone today. Every time I looked at her tortured gaze, an immeasurable pain coursed through me.

My voice was lost whenever my eyes met hers.

I felt like I had failed her. Part of me wished that I could have been there to save her. I hated knowing another fairy would never flutter her wings again. My heart ached for her children, would they ever see their mother again? *Would I?*

Lote was busy checking on everyone work this morning. Lotetra or Lote as everyone called her was like the castle mom. She was always around. Lote always had a shoulder to cry on or an open ear for anyone and everyone.

I wasn't as enamored with her as the rest of them.

She was the oldest fairy I had met so far. Lote's hair was salt and pepper and cropped short around her ears and neck. Heavy bangs stopped short from covering her dark grey eyes. She wore the same dress as the rest of us except it was navy instead of black. There was just something about her that rubbed me wrong. I could never place it, but there was something behind that permanent smile that

never rang true to my heart. I could never pinpoint it. Never did I share my feelings about her with anyone, not even Evver. Possibly, it was just more confused feelings about my new life.

I could hear humming coming down the hallway.

Lote was rushing her ever present smile ready to welcome the next person she saw. Her wings seemed different from the others. They moved more than any others I had seen. Maybe it was because they were older, more broken in? Unlike the others, her wings looked ready to take off at any moment.

“Busy, busy,” she quipped.

Forcing a smile to match her, “Yes, Lote.”

With that she hurried past me. Relief flooded me when I could no longer hear her tiny footsteps.

Why was it when she was near I could feel a vice tighten around my anxious heart? Turning back to the bubbly floor I was grateful for the muddy floors to keep my thoughts busy.

*

Drayben stood silently in the South wing.

He was Tommit’s right hand. Tall and thin, his body resembled a beanstalk. Dark beady eyes made his prominent nose stand out. Long oversized teeth pushed out his upper lip. The way he constantly played with his hands made him resemble a weasel. The only thing missing was whiskers jutting out of his face.

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Drayben wore an oversized white puffy ruffled shirt. It looked like it was made for a man two or three sizes larger than him. A sparkly red vest helped pull it toward his body. Gold pants, which could light the night sky, finished it off. He looked like he would have fit in at a Las Vegas show. Right now, he was in his “workshop”. It was more like a house of horrors.

He loved to tinker here during his free time. He could have been using this time to build things for the good of the kingdom, but instead he was busy making devices or coming up with plans to destroy Tommit’s enemies. Right now, Drayben was looking for ways to secure his power and Tommit to keep in his throne.

The Destroyers were already working on one plan, but there had to be another way in case things didn’t work out. Perhaps the old trick of the king having an heir. If Tommit had a wife whom the kingdom loved and she had a child well the thought was delicious. Drayben was practically salivating at the thought.

Tommit’s bride would have to be beautiful.

Someone the people wanted to love and take care of. She had to be young and willing. If that meant threatening her life, then Drayben would enjoy it even more. Right now he was waiting for a report. He had eyes and ears all over the castle and kingdom. One of his moles was on their way. Drayben

relied on his “friends” for information. He had his hands everywhere. It was his idea to kill all of the older Giants. Drayben thought up to the age of ten wasn’t a threat. Anyone over that age was swiftly dealt with.

He enjoyed his role helping Tommit, crush the wills of those around him. A humming could be heard from down the hall. It was followed by the familiar flutter of Fairy wings. She was getting closer, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. Around the doorway popped Lote. Her normal smile had deviousness to it, which she normally kept hidden from the rest of the world.

Her wings fluttered to a stop, “Feels good to stretch these old girls.” Lote made a big flutter with her wings. “How’s your day, *Dray?*”

He hated it when she shortened his name, but he tolerated her quirks because the castle staff trusted her. She was able to glean information where no one else could.

“Well, and you?” Feigning interest in her day.

“Oh busy, busy. There is always something new going on and new arrivals to usher in.”

“Very nice. Now, have you heard anything of interest as of late?”

“No. Thankfully everyone is under control. They all are eager to serve. It’s wonderful.”

Drayben sighed, a sense of relief. It made things easier when he didn’t have to worry about things at the castle.

“Good. Good. Now I have a new task for you. We need to find a suitable bride for King Tommit. I want the kingdom searched high and low. She must be beautiful from the outside and within. I want

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someone whom the kingdom would be willing to die for; willing to fight for, but we need leverage against her as well. We need someone who can be easily controlled.”

*

Lote’s eyes were bright with excitement. She loved having a new task. It caused her great glee to be able to work in secret with Drayben. She wasn’t one that cared how Tommit ruled only that she was able to live comfortably.

*

“You know I will do anything you need. Don’t you know that by now Dray?” Revulsion seeped through him. Yet he smiled in appreciation.

“Go now. We must make haste. You shouldn’t waste your precious time talking to me. Off you go then.” Bowing slightly her wings started fluttering and off she went.

*

Lote reveled in her position. She had the run of the castle, which was more freedom than anyone else. Lote hated how she couldn’t fly in the open. When Fairies were enslaved at the castle their wings were immediately clipped. On each wing there was an Arek muscle it controlled the movement of each wing. It was excruciating, when clipped and stopped them from flying forever. She had to pretend hers were gone as well. It was an irritation but worth the ruse.

Being older and acting like she cared for each lost soul, she was privy to their thoughts and feelings. *It was perfect.* Any time she brought news she was well rewarded. Lote was busy dreaming of the possibilities' of finding Tommit's bride would bring. She was drooling at making all her dreams come true. Lote was consumed with her thoughts she almost flew toward Aurora. It was only the sound of her singing that stopped her short.

*

To pass the time, since I was alone, I had started singing to myself.

It was something I had done a million times before I became trapped in Paradan. To keep myself focused I sang childhood lullabies'. They always soothed me before. I was so caught up in my thoughts and the song that I was startled by Lote coming swiftly around the corner.

"*LOTE_*" escaped my lips. She looked frazzled for the first time since I had met her. Her face looked like it was trying to remember just how to smile.

"Aurora, how are things going?" Her normal calm demeanor seemed shaken. She looked agitated, almost guilty. It was incredibly strange—it was like she didn't remember seeing me, earlier. She talked to me like it was the first time she had seen me in a while.

"Fine. How's your day?"

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“Fine. Fine. Just very busy as you know. I will see you later.” I smiled warmly in response waiting for her to make her retreat. She just stood there staring at me.

As she looked me over, it sent chills up my lower spine. I could feel ice crystals starting to form around the crevices of my spinal cord. The way she continued to look at me, with that glazed over smile, gave me the willies. Growing up my Grandma used to say how someone was walking over her grave. I always thought she had a flair for the melodramatic. Now I finally understood what she meant, this was the way that Lote’s stare was making me feel.

Feeling my heart tighten and my breathing stop, I forced my eyes from her.

I tried to focus on the muddy floors. My neck muscles were threatening to seize up. Terror had taken hold of me and I was clueless as to why. Lote’s humming began and I heard her footsteps moving down the hall. The fear remained and I gasped for air. My lungs screamed at me pleading for air. I appeased them and my eyes began filling with tears. The way she had looked at me reminded me of the way the Huntsman had looked at Snow White before taking her into the forest. I quickened my pace. Finishing the floor in record time my breathing remained strained. My chest still felt like someone was standing on it. I needed to see Evver. My heart longed to see Cassius. They grounded me in this unimaginable dream. They were my lifelines. Fear still bubbled in my blood.

I headed to my newest safe harbor, the kitchen.

Strangely enough it calmed me being in the warm tiny room. Smelling the scents of fresh baked bread and spicy soup my steps quickened. The loud rumble of my hollow stomach announced my arrival. Heads turned and strained eyes met mine.

My smile quickly faded.

Something was wrong. I had sensed it when I saw Lote, but looking at my friends fear, sadness and resignation filled the space around them.

“What’s wrong?”

Evver’s eyes were red and puffy. Tears still fell from her wide green eyes. My feet couldn’t get to her fast enough my arms encircling her. No one was speaking. They were afraid to say the words out loud. This made me want to hold the moment a few seconds longer. I tried to regain my courage.

Knowing is always better than not knowing. *Right?* Then we could deal with it. Fight it even. I have learned there are sometimes when the best thing is denial. Now, would have been one of those times. Seated around the table were people I had grown to care about.

There was Evver, Shia, Reber and Simit. Simit was a Dwarf that worked around the castle. His face had been deformed during one of the early battles. Normally he worked in the kitchen, or stable away from any of the kingdoms watchful eyes. King Tommit liked to put up a good front in front of the other humans. Kazor was seated near the doorway. He looked like a child who had awoken from a terrible nightmare and was desperately searching for his favorite teddy bear.

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“Evver, why is everyone so upset?” She looked up at me trying to make my face come into focus.

She remained silent. My fear was building. “Evver, please, tell me.” I begged.

“Simit was delivering King Tommit’s dinner. They ignore him normally, today was no different.

King Tommit was talking to that awful— Drayben.” She paused furrowing her little brow in obvious

disgust. “They are searching for a bride for King Tommit. Drayben has people searching the kingdom

but.” she trailed off. Her voice silenced by the quivering lips. Anguished fear overtook her tiny

features. Ice began to inch its way around my heart.

“But what Evver?”

“Drayben mentioned you_ Your name, Aurora_ King Tommit wants you in the throne room just after breakfast in the morning.”

My heart stopped.

Chapter 6

My eyes were close to swelling shut.

Terror had passed and despair had set in for the long haul. I was in my night dress. It looked like a long baby doll dress with long open sleeves. It was made of some sort of cotton material. Off-white in color. At first, it at first felt rough on my skin, but now it was reminding me I was still alive. Curled up in a ball at the end of my bed, my tears had dried out.

Evver was fast asleep.

I had tried to be brave in front of her. It didn't last long. I welcomed the darkness of the unlit night. My mood matched the utter gloom of the shadows, which slipped deeper around me. A touch tore me out of my misery.

I should have screamed—but there was gentleness to the touch I found comforting.

"Aurora," a quiet voice whispered.

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“Cassius?” My voice was rough with emotion. Struggling to pull myself up, I felt the familiar warmth of his strong hands steady me into a seated position. I noticed his arm had found its way around my back.

“Aurora, what’s going on? Everyone is so upset. I couldn’t even find Evver. What’s wrong? Is it Evver?” His voice was controlled but upset.

“Evver’s fine. She’s asleep on my bed.” His head turned and his hands began searching for her. His hands found her tiny legs. A deep sigh of relief escaped his lips.

“Thank goodness.” I could feel his body release some of the tension. “But why is everyone so upset?” I wasn’t sure how I was going to be able to say the words out loud. The longer I waited the tighter his grip became.

“Aurora. . . please,” he begged.

“Simit overheard something earlier. It has everyone upset. Tommit has decided that he wants to take a bride and secure an heir.” A short gasp escaped his mouth.

“That is upsetting.” I could tell he was weighing the possibilities in his mind. “I was worried the way everyone was acting—it is like someone died.” Fear overtook me again. I could feel tears starting to fall again. Only the feel of his heated breath hot against my skin kept me from drowning in it. “What is wrong?” His voice was husky and heavy.

My heart was heavy.

“Drayben mentioned my name. I am set to appear before King Tommit just after breakfast tomorrow.” I stopped talking allowing my words to seep in. With every second that passed his grip tightened around me.

The pleasure this caused was tempered by the pain of his grip. I could feel his muscles tightening as he pulled me closer. Cassius’s lips almost touched mine. His breath left me dizzy. He kept repeating the word no over and over willing it to be true. Each one more pained, than the first. I wanted to comfort him. My mind was blank of anything but fear for my future and the rush of heat from his touch.

I tried to focus . . . he was making it impossible.

I finally thought of something to say, but just as I opened my mouth to speak he pulled me even closer and kissed me. Our lips and bodies molded together, as if they were made for this only purpose. When we finally parted, a groan was heard but I wasn’t sure which of our lips uttered it.

Cassius continued to hold me close to his rapidly beating heart. Our kiss changed something in me. It was as if my whole life had been in black and white. The only change was, mixtures of gray which would sneak in on a stolen occasion. Now I could see all of the colors that the entire world had to offer. My heart soared and sunk at the same moment. At that very moment I realized what my heart had

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known since I first laid eyes on Cassius. *I loved him*. If King Tommit had his way, we would never be together.

*

Cassius held me in his arms for hours after our first kiss.

Not a word was spoken during that entire time. We sat clinging to each other. The sun was threatening to make an early appearance. I knew what that meant Cassius had to leave.

"You have to go," hating the words I forced out of my trembling lips.

"I— can't."

"Cassius, you can't be found here. If not for me, then think about Evver. Please." The mention of his tiny sister had his eyes looking for her gentle face. The sunlight filtered in through the window in my room making her skin shimmer.

I could tell he was torn on what choice to make. He didn't want to leave me but we both knew what would happen if we were found together. Especially now that there was a chance I was possibly going to be Tommit's Queen. There were soft sounds coming down the hallway. I didn't have to guess, I knew it was one of the guards coming to check in on me. Making sure I remained on my time for my meeting with Tommit.

“Go now_” I whispered frantically. His eyes went from me to the sleeping Evver. Pausing for the briefest of moments he leaned over and gave me a quick kiss just brushing my lips, then ran to the window. I was on the second story of the castle. There was no time to object to the insanity of him jumping through my window. The knob on my door was turning. I hurried and lay down on my bed using the blanket and my body to hide Evver.

Slowing my breath I could sense eyes on me.

A satisfied grunt sounded over my face. Heated sour breath rushed over my face. Shuffling heavy feet sounded clumsily out of my room. Not taking any care in closing the door, as it closed with a loud bang and a curse. I wondered if they had run into my door but I didn't dare open my eyes. I was exhausted. So much had happened today. My head was spinning. My stomach was fighting with my desire to sleep, since and I hadn't eaten anything since yesterday morning.

I had been in the south wing since early this morning and then I found out about Drayben and Tommit's conversation. It had wiped any thoughts of eating clear from my mind. Normally Evver was on top of me to eat at every meal.

It was funny how much of a mother hen she could be. Tonight she was a child scared, in pain. Her thoughts had been elsewhere. Hunger and stress warring with each other.

Finally, sleep won the battle with my weakened body.

Chapter 7

It took all my effort to push back my eye lids this morning. Evver was gone already and I felt guilty for oversleeping. I blushed, grateful she had slept thru my moment with Cassius last night. My lips still smoldered from our kiss. Remembering the heat of his touch, I shivered in the cool morning air. There wasn't much time to savor the sweet memory. Three fairies, none of which I recognized burst eagerly into my room.

One held a beautiful deep burgundy gown. The bottom was full and the top was a jewel encrusted at the sweetheart neckline. The arms reached from my wrists, stopping just short of my shoulders. My bodice was tightened like a corset by golden ribbons. Each looked like they had been dipped in diamonds.

Another fairy went to work on my hair.

I was surprised at how much it had grown since I had arrived in Paradan. There were six to eight inches of new growth in only a few weeks. It had tripled in thickness. Maybe it was part of the magic of this place. I couldn't be sure. She pulled up a portion from the front and braided it so it looked like a crown set high on my head. The rest she curled with her fingers. The remaining fairy opened a bag filled with jewels and deep burgundy flowers that I didn't recognize.

They matched my dress perfectly.

I was decked out in jewels, a dark garnet choker necklace, followed by a matching bracelet. Matching hair pins adorned my "crown." A large garnet ring, had to be at least ten carats, sat on my right hand, ring finger.

My left hand, ring finger was noticeably empty.

When they finished, I looked every bit the part of a soon-to-be queen. It was difficult to not get caught up in the moment. I wished Cassius could see me like this, even if only for an instant. There was a knock at my door.

"Come in," called one of the mysterious fairies. The door opened. Standing in the door frame was a man, who I didn't know. He looked me over, licking his lips in the process. It made me feel incredibly dirty.

I longed to bathe, just to wash the slime off which his look left.

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“Perfect_ You may now leave.” With a quick bow in his direction the Fairies rushed out of the room leaving me alone with the slimy creature. “Aurora, you will be meeting with his majesty shortly. First, I would like to make a few things clear. King Tommit is going to ask for your hand in marriage.” I had guessed this but hearing the words come out of this creepy animal caused a slight gasp to spill out. He laughed darkly at my dismay.

“Now, now. You need to work on accepting your fate,” I shook my head no with his every word. “You *will* accept his proposal and you will be a gracious and humble woman, who is fit to sit next to a KING_” His voice got more forceful, and then he smiled a mocking smile. I could tell that he fed off of my fear. “I would hate to have anything happen to your little red headed fairy friend.”

Terror swept through me.

I thought of Evver. *Where was she? Did he do something to her? How could I have slept through her leaving my bed this morning?* Drayben knew he had struck a raw nerve. I could see how he was savoring the moment.

“Where is she?” I snarled wildly at him then lunged at his throat.

He put his hands up at me and shook his spindly pointer finger at me. “She is perfectly safe for now.” It hit me if I played nice then Evver would be safe and if I didn’t I couldn’t even think about it. An immense, sharp, crippling pain shot through my entire body pooling in my heart. Lowering

my head in concession, he knew he'd won. Drayben had found one of the things for which I was willing to endure anything for— even marrying Tommit.

“You have chosen wisely, my dear. I will have a little reward for you— *if* you behave yourself when you meet with King Tommit.” All I could think about was Evver. I would do anything it took to see her and know she was safe. He reached out his slimy hand willing me to take it. With trepidation I added my hand to his. It was cold and scaly and it reminded me of snakes I had once been forced to hold one day in Biology. It had been poisonous once but had since had its ducts milked. Now when it took a bite out of someone it would cause a mild irritation instead of being life threatening.

Drayben's poison came from his threats and manipulations.

We walked down the labyrinth of halls. Finally we arrived at the throne room before we stepped inside he whispered a single menacing word into my trembling ear.

“Remember.”

Today was only the second time I had been in the throne room. The first time I had been called a thing, traitor, and spy and looked at in total disgust. Now here I was taking steps toward being King Tommit's queen. He was seated on his massive throne, looking smug and bored at the same time. When he spotted us his hands gripped together in anticipation. I was hoping when he saw me it would inspire revulsion. Praying he would reject me at first glance.

Instead of revulsion, there was lust and desire in his sinister eyes.

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Whether it was lust for me or desire in securing his power, I would never know. I only knew one thing. . . . *my fate had been decided.*

*

A sinking sensation pierced him deep in his pained heart.

Cassius couldn't be certain but it was close to the time Aurora was to have an audience with Tommit. *How could this be happening?* Finally he felt like he had found someone who could be his other half. She made him feel whole, for the first time in his lifetime.

His walls magically disappeared when she was near. His heart warmed when he thought of last night and their kiss— his first. It left Aurora forever burned in his heart and soul. He was brushing Darant, Tommit's prize Pegasus.

Cassius shared a special bond with him.

He was the only human who had ever been able to ride him. Even Tommit was forced to sit on the sidelines as Cassius rode him. Darant was beautiful pure white with icy blue eyes which matched Cassius's perfectly. He had been wild before Cronan had captured him bringing him as a prize for his king. No matter what was tried no one could ride him, or even get close enough to touch him. This all changed when Cassius met Darant.

It was as if they had always been together.

With Abow deep in hiding with Ember, he was the closest thing Cassius had to a friend. Normally he would have just told Darant what was bothering him but King Tommit had eyes and ears everywhere. He couldn't chance it so he counted down the hours before he could see Aurora again. Every moment which passed made him wonder what was happening in the castle.

Not knowing was torture.

*

"Your Excellency. I present you Miss Aurora." His hand on mine tightened around my trembling fingers, pulling me closer to the salivating ogre before me. King Tommit stepped up out of his throne, coming inches from my face. His heated breath sending chills running deep into my bones. Warning bells went off deep in my stomach, pushing me to run far and fast, anywhere but next to this despicable monster.

"Nice choice Drayben. The people will like her. On the plus side this will be fun for me as well." His hand caressed my cheek. I fought back the urge, to vomit. The thought of his hands on me, his lips touching mine the way Cassius' had, was too much to deal with. I could feel the sting of tears fighting their way trying to escape.

One word . . . Evver.

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It was all I needed to stop them from falling. Forcing a smile, I pictured Cassius in front of me instead. Closing my eyes for the briefest of moments, when they opened Cassius had taken Tommit's place.

"You will make a lovely Queen." His warm smile held me in place. I longed for my mirage to be real. It didn't last, "Drayben give me the ring." At the mention of the terrifying creature Cassius was gone and Tommit had returned. He reached for my hand; there was none of the gentleness I had experienced with Cassius. Tommit reminded me of the bullies I had left behind in the real world. Drayben handed over something bright and sparkling. Tommit slipped it on my ring finger. It was the largest diamond I had ever seen. It reminded me of the cosmetic jewelry they sold on those home shopping networks. The square cut diamond was set in the middle it had to be at least ten carats. It was surrounded by small square cut diamonds that continued around the band. It was dazzling.

Tommit took my quivering hand and kissed it.

He was almost charming for a minute. *Almost*. I was certain some would find him handsome but he was no Cassius. Instead of the warmth of Cassius' kiss his had given me arctic chills down my spine. I bit my tongue—stopping the disgust from showing.

Tommit turned to Drayben, ignoring me once again.

“We will need to start introducing her to the kingdom. I think we should announce “*my*” engagement within the next three days. We need to have the wedding within the next two weeks. The sooner the better as far as I am concerned.” He continued on as if I wasn’t in the room. I could see I was just a prop in his game. When Drayben finally recalled, I was still in the room he turned to a guard.

“Take Aurora to her new room.” Then he turned back to Tommit.

I wanted to object. If I was sent to another room in the enormous castle how would Evver find me? Cassius? After Drayben’s threats, I was frightened to speak out. Following the guards into a new wing of the castle it was more opulent than the other wings I was familiar with. We ended at a long hallway; the guards paused before opening the double doors. He motioned for me to enter the room. It’s strange to be afraid of a room. This hasn’t happened to me since I was a little girl.

It was my first day of Kindergarten.

I clung to my mother afraid of what a classroom might offer. It had all been in the vain. The second I passed the threshold I was fine. *Would it be the same here?*

Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward.

Chapter 8

The room was unlike anything I had ever seen. A large canopy bed was centered on the far wall. The four corners of the bed looked like tree trunks growing up into the sky. They grew together the branches intertwining into themselves over the bed. It was golden and shimmered in the daylight which slipped thru the windows. It was beautiful but nothing could have compared to the beauty of the little girl who stood next to it. Evver__

I tried to contain my excitement and relief. The guard shut the doors behind me. I rushed to my friend.

"Evver__"

“Aurora, you look beautiful.” I pulled back out of our embrace. Looking her over to make sure not a hair had been harmed. She looked perfect so I started to relax.

“*Where have you been all morning?*” It came out more accusingly than I had planned. I was just so concerned Drayben had hurt her.

“It was odd. I woke early and headed to the kitchen. Lote was there and she wanted me to work out in the garden this morning. I spent hours gathering herbs to dry before the snow falls. Where were you? Why are we here?” My breathing calmed.

She hadn’t been hurt or terrorized. All of the things my imagination been taunting me with. It struck me as odd that Lote was the one to send her away. *Did Lote know what happened with me this morning? How could I explain it all?* After all, when I said it out loud then it would make it real. I sat her down on the window seat, which looked out into the kingdom. The view was stunning, but I couldn’t let that distract me.

I had to tell her before she noticed my ring.

“I know you think Cassius will find a way out of this. There are some things that cannot be fixed no matter how much you wish it. Evver it’s hard to explain. This morning I woke up and I was brought this beautiful dress. They did my hair and had me prepared to see King Tommit. Drayben came to my room and then— he brought me to the throne room.” I paused, trying to make the words work with my

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mouth. My brain and heart were fighting each other. She put her tiny hands on mine. Her eyes were wide with fear and concern. I could see the tears starting to form around the edges.

I reached out to touch her tiny face attempting to soothe her pain.

"Aurora no_" Her words were fierce.

"As it stands. . . ." Taking a deep breath before saying the words out loud. "I am set to marry King Tommit in three weeks. I pray something changes before then but whatever happens we will be ok." I opened my arms inviting her in. She sunk into my arms and sighed heavily.

"Cas will find a way, Aurora. I know he will."

I honestly didn't think she would have such a strong reaction. It was easy to forget how Evver was only just a child most of the time; due to the fact she acted older than anyone I knew. Here I was, the one who should be taking care of her, instead of the other way around. Playing with her hair soothed both of us. We sat there for over an hour until my stomach betrayed me. A large growl was mixed with a deep gurgle. It had her sitting up immediately.

"Did you eat today?" Her tone was tough and I looked down sheepishly. It made me want to laugh about how she could go from pained child to mother hen in two seconds.

"I honestly hadn't thought about it." She climbed down off the bed and straightened her uniform.

“Wait here. I will be back with something to eat. Stay here,” she ordered pointing her little finger at me.

I threw up my arms in mock surrender, “Promise_”

She rolled her eyes at me and giggled. Forgetting the tension of from earlier, she skipped out of the room gleefully. Before closing the door she smiled sweetly at me. “Cas will find a way.”

She shut the door with a knowing smile. I adjusted my sitting position on the window seat and looked at the kingdom below. *It was really a beautiful place.* Maybe Cassius could find a way out of this. A small ray of hope started to grow in the pit of my stomach.

Could it be possible?

Could my fate be changed?

Is there a chance, I could still have my happily ever after? Maybe even with Cassius. My smile started to spread as I thought of my life taking shape with Cassius at my side instead of Tommit. Thinking of my life with Cassius had my hope soaring I was starting to see it.

There was a loud rap at the door.

At first I thought Evver had forgotten something. She hadn't been gone long enough to make it to the kitchen and back. Without even waiting for my reply, the door opened.

It was Drayben.

Chapter 9

All hope disappeared when I saw the sinister look in his eyes.

They were black as the darkest night. I was sure they matched the color of his soul—if he even had one. His smile was sinister and to be honest it was quite frightening. The familiar steel vice of terror returned to my already quaking heart. He moved to quickly corner me into one of the empty walls. His breath was hot and smelled like that of a dragon.

At least the way I imagined it would smell.

“Finding your new room comfortable, I hope.” I nodded afraid to speak. “Good. And your little reward for being such a good girl? Your little fairy friend will be assigned to only you. She will be at your beck and call. I have made sure she is assigned to be your hand maiden, as long as you continue to*cooperate.*” I tried to make my lungs breathe in and out. Drayben continued to weld shut the door on my happily ever after with Cassius.

"I am having some gowns delivered to you. The future Queen, should look the part." I forced a smile, but I was certain it was more of a grimace. "Remember I have eyes and ears everywhere. Guards will accompany you everywhere. If you even think of running off . . . I will know it before you have even left your room, and it won't end well for your little— *bug*."

I tensed at the use of the word bug. I had called Evver my little bug one night when we were talking after bed time. The fact he was aware of this had me chilled to the bone.

"Remember what I have said." He traced the outline of my face with his spindly finger.

Then he turned and made his way out of my room taking any hope of a happy life with him.

Drayben had been in my room less than two minutes and in that time he had taken me to a new level of terror I had never experienced. I was questioning every moment I had made in the castle. *Did he know about Cassius? Was Cassius safe?* I couldn't take it my chest got tighter and my breathing got shorter and shorter. I knew that I was about to have a panic attack.

I had to get it together.

Evver would be coming back soon and I didn't want her to see me like this. I had to be strong I had to be in control. I couldn't give away what had transpired in this room. Pretending like I still held out hope, for her at least. In reality I had accepted my fate.

I was going to marry Tommit.

The Wishing Well

Chapter 10

Cassius looked around. He was pleased to see so many in attendance. They were going to need the numbers if they had a prayer of making this work. His heart ached. He couldn't focus on his pain — he had a purpose and getting caught up in his emotions was the last thing he needed to do.

“I want to thank you all for coming.”

Around the flattened black speckled toadstool which measured about ten feet in diameter; there were twelve others anxiously seated. There were three trolls, three fairies, three giants and three other humans. Most were seated on old withered tree stumps. Fireflies lit the night sky. Soft candlelight had the fairies shimmering bodies, sparkling in the twilight. Cassius looked at the would-be rebels and prayed that his words would move them into take action.

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It was the only hope of bringing down King Tommit.

“We all know how dangerous it is for us to gather here. So, I will keep this brief. King Tommit will not stop until we are all enslaved and most of us are . . . *dead*. Now he is taking steps to cement his hold on the throne. He has chosen a bride and seeks to bring an heir as soon as possible.” Cassius paused.

Thinking of Tommit touching Aurora had him on fire. Fury had been simmering since he took the throne but the thought of him forcing himself on Aurora . . . Well, let’s just say that proved to be the match strike to the dormant gasoline coursing through his veins.

“The wedding is planned for two weeks from tomorrow. That gives us only thirteen days to bring him down.” One of the trolls looked around nervously. Raising his hand, he looked terrified to speak.

“We may have less time than that.”

“What do you know, Bontox?” Cassius asked, afraid of the answer.

“King Tommit is searching for *something*, something that would change everything. He has a legion of his Destroyers and Cronan looking.”

“What is he searching for?”

Bontox paused before speaking fearing their reactions. “Ecracias wishing well.”

Gasps of shock and disbelief were heard around the tense circle. Murmuring started between them all. Cassius was shaking with rage. If Tommit found the well then all would be lost. Ecracias wishing

well was built over a thousand years ago. It had been a gift to Princess Ecracias. The whole magical community had gone in together building it. She was then gifted with twelve Para's. They were each a single golden coin that had her mother's image on one side. Queen Erat had died during childbirth. They saw this as a gift to her memory as well.

None of them realized the power the well possessed. At first Ecracias' wishes were small— a unicorn with pink polka dots. Then, as she grew, her wishes grew. One of her last wishes was for a dragon to fly. Instead of one, three dragons appeared and nearly destroyed the kingdom. They were rounded up and now the dragons guarded the kingdom.

The wishing well was then hidden by magic.

Only three Para's remained. They were each hidden around the kingdom. People eventually forgot about the well. It became a legend and a warning to all future generations. They all knew the danger if King Tommit possessed that strength of power.

He would be—undefeatable.

"This is very troubling. I don't need to explain just how dangerous it is. We need to rally our families, friends, even our — *enemies*. I will need a volunteer to go to Fara. See if we have anyone in their kingdom that is willing to help us. Or possibly if someone could shed some light on how King Tommit came to seize the throne." Nods of assent were coming from around the circle. Trix the smallest of the rebelling circle flew up on the toadstool. Her wings fluttered in the night air. She had long black hair that

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was gathered up in several braids, which were tied together and looked like a rose. Violets were woven thru her hair, accenting her dark lavender gossamer dress. Her eyes were the color of a ripe plum and her porcelain skin shimmered in the candlelight.

“I will go,” her timid voice spoke up.

The fireflies moved around her giving the effect of a spotlight shining on her. Trix’s cheeks glowed, crimson from the attention.

“Are you certain? It will be dangerous—you *may never return*.” Cassius voice was steeped with worry.

“Stop trying to convince me, Cassius,” her words were followed by a mischievous wink. “I know what I am signing up for. You forget I have already lost loved ones too. More of my family is missing. If there is any chance of finding out what happened to them” Her voice and thoughts trailed off. Steel resolve flashed fiery in her eyes. “**I’m going_**”

No one could argue with that.

“Granted. Would you at least consider taking someone along? I would feel better knowing that you had someone with you.” A giant leaned forward.

“I will go, and I will bring the little lady home safely.” The vow came out of Tidens’ mouth. He was only four years old, but stood at over twenty-five feet tall already. There had always been an

underlying sadness in his icy blue eyes. White blonde tufts of curls shot out from every direction of his head. His parents had been hold outs hiding deep in the beanstalk forest. They hid for almost two years after Tommit had the other giant adults killed. Cronan found them on one of his many raids. They were able to hide Tiden, but they lost their lives in the fight. Tiden, like Cassius, had been raised by a mixed family.

“Very good, Tiden. Thank you.”

Tiden stood and Trix flew up landing on his shoulder.

“God speed, my friends.” Cassius’ words were fervent and pained. With a silent nod they turned and went on their way. Several fireflies followed lighting the night air for the new travelers. Cassius felt the weight of their lives sitting heavy on his weary shoulders.

“Why don’t we call it a night? We will meet back here in three moons. By then I will expect reports from even the outer lying settlements. Remember Tommit has eyes and ears everywhere. Be careful with whom you entrust. Our lives depend on it. Be safe, my friends and god speed.”

The mood was somber as they each took one last look at each other.

Danger and death weighed heavy in the eyes of each new rebel. Each one went silently alone into the murky darkness of the forbidding night. Cassius slumped down into one of the awaiting stumps. He had been left alone in the still darkness.

Even the fireflies had retreated into the gloomy night.

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So many thoughts and emotions were running through him. Cassius had always been very protective of those he loved. Aurora brought out a new fierceness he never knew existed within him. He would fight to the death to save her. Never had he felt this way about anyone. Part of him always wondered if he would ever feel this way. He'd always struggled with romantic love. Never knowing his birth parents, he wondered if he was capable of it. While it was true . . . he saw many different types of love in his adoptive families.

But it wasn't the same.

Part of him wondered if the thought of his parents not having loved him enough to keep him had led him to believe that he was unable to love that deeply. Realizing how long he had been sitting here sulking; he was going to be late. Security has been tighter at the castle since the announcement of the engagement. Drayben was concerned that Aurora would find a way to escape before the wedding. So he had doubled the night guards. It had been days since Cassius had seen Evver or Aurora.

Tonight he was hoping to rectify that.

Using a different entrance each time, he quietly moved through the darkness. Whenever light started to approach, he went in the opposite direction. After an hour of the cat and mouse routine he found his way to Aurora's new room. Slipping past the sleeping guard, he entered Aurora's new bed-chamber. It was a far cry from Evver's storage closet. Her room could easily hold the large stable

where he spent his days. In the middle of the room sat a large canopy bed. It was covered with golden satin fabric. A deep red comforter with the royal crest rested on. The bed was filled with more pillows than his eyes had ever seen. There were large dressers which were hand carved and delicate. Fresh flowers littered the room. Their scent was overpowering.

There was a large window seat that overlooked the kingdom.

This is where he found them. Evver had her tiny arms wrapped, around a sobbing Aurora. They were both so wrapped up in their own misery, the whole kingdom could have stormed in and they would have never noticed.

Seeing Aurora so miserable ripped fresh layers off of his already raw heart.

Pain stabbed deep within him with each step. Cassius ignored the calling of his arms to rush and sweep her into them. He longed to wipe away the tears falling from her lovely face. When he was only steps from the window seat, Evver finally noticed him. A quiet delighted squeal escaped her throat. Aurora looked up. Her eyes locked on Cassius. They pulled him to her. It was as if his body was being pulled toward her. Evver and Aurora stood. Then Evver rushed to him. He wrapped his strong arms around his little sister. At the same time his eyes never left Aurora's. Her tears had slowed and her mouth fell open as if she were trying to speak.

*

I couldn't believe my eyes.

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Cassius was here. Just seeing his gentle eyes allowed me to really breathe for the first time since my latest nightmare had begun. His muscular arms were wrapped around Evver. A familiar pang of jealousy struck my aching heart. I knew it was ridiculous, but I wanted him to hold me. I held my fisted hands at my side and willed my body to stop from reaching out to him. His aqua eyes were locked on me. I could feel my pain being transported to his gentle features. His gaze tightened, along with his neck muscles when he saw the enormous diamond on my ring finger.

Evver pulled back from his embrace. Tears were misting down her diminutive features. It hurt me to see her in so much pain. I had kept my mouth quiet about Drayben's threats. She didn't need the added weight on her tiny shoulders.

"Oh Cass, what are we going to do?" She whispered in agony. His hands reached up to wipe away her tears. He smiled at the sister he loved so much.

It was an incredibly tender moment and it filled my heart to see it.

"It's all going to work out Evver. Have I ever let you down before?" Her head shook no in agreement. "I'm working on it. You just have to stay strong for me. For Aurora," his eyes returned to mine. "Are you alright?" His words were now directed toward me.

I tried to speak but my voice would give away my fear so I nodded. Evver stepped out of his embrace and I walked toward him. We met in the middle.

“You, look, beautiful Aurora.” My face flushed warm in response.

I looked down at the opulent golden velvet gown. It was the kind of thing I imagined in fairy tales, a square neckline, a corseted bodice that tightened to my waist and then flared like a bell. Encrusted jewels went down the front and wide sleeves hung from my wrists.

I hated it.

True, it was beautiful the type of things most little girls dreamed of wearing. It was a gift from my soon to be—husband. I gagged at the thought looking at Cassius. In the candlelight his image burned into my soul. *I would hold it there forever.* It would help me get thru the hard or impossible moments with Tommit.

It was like looking at the sun for even a brief second.

For the longest while after the light is all you can see for a prolonged time, I would hold this memory with me, no matter what my future held. His eyes were blazing; his walnut hair was covered with crystallized drops of rain. Long and lean muscles bulged under his clothes. Cassius was wearing an off-white shirt with an oversized collar and buckskin suede string laced up the front. Dark chestnut brown riding pants ended in black leather riding boots. The look on his face reminded me of the Prince Phillip’s resolve as he charged the burning castle and Maleficent on Sleeping Beauty. It was my mom’s favorite fairy tale. It was how I got my name, after her favorite princess.

How I longed for my, happily ever after.

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“Please don’t worry Aurora.” His hand reached up and brushed my skin. My face heated by his touch. My heart rate soared while my hands shook with exhilaration. I wanted for him to take me in his awaiting arms, but it could never happen. I had to remain strong. I stepped back afraid that if he touched me again that I would lose all of my resolve. There was a glimmer of hurt in his eyes but it didn’t last.

“You shouldn’t be here,” fearing that my room was already surrounded by guards.

“I had to come. I needed to know what’s been happening.” His eyes found my large diamond again. “He gave you Queen Alis ring? It’s been missing for years.” I looked down at the anchor dragging me to the depths of Hades. I never stopped to think that there could actually be a story behind the ring.

“Alis?”

“King Winston’s mother was the last Queen who ruled Paradan. Her husband was killed by an attack from Rartan. It was before the treaty— before peace. She passed on when King Winston was only fifteen years of age. He was tasked with taking over the kingdom and all of the mess left by the time of war. He was King Windom’s father. He was a merciful king; he is the one who brought the treaty into effect. Without him, the kingdoms would all be in ruins by now. Sorry . . . the last thing you need now is a history lesson.”

He smiled and stepped closer to me.

I could smell his scent. It was fresh and earthy like he had just cut the grass on a warm summer night. My heart sped up. I had to take another step back to steady myself.

"It's fine, but you really should go. I have guards checking on me regularly. It would end terribly if you were found here." I looked to Evver to give me some back up. She knew I was right.

"Look Cas, why don't you, meet me in the kitchen tomorrow night. I can give you an update. But Aurora is right. It will be awful if they find you here with her."

He could tell neither of us was going to back down.

"Fine. I will be back tomorrow, but don't lose hope I am working on it." He took two quick steps and kissed my forehead before hugging Evver and slipping back out the door. I felt like half of myself left with him. It was dangerous to feel like this but part of me longed to run after him.

Evver walked over to me and took my hand in hers.

Chapter 11

I savored the moment.

The heat lingered on my skin from his touch. My tears had dried out. Nothing remained. I pretended to sleep. Evver was continually worried about me. She wouldn't stop until I slept. I tried to ease my breathing slowing it enough for her to believe my act. I heard a contented sigh. The sound of her creaking cot gave me great satisfaction. *I hated this*. She was hurting more because of me. My appearance down the well only brought more pain to her gentle heart. Now I understand she had been in pain long before I had made my way to the castle on a smelly troll's back. It seemed every day I added to her young life more complications, not to mention stress.

I struggled with the sheer impossibility of what had become of my life. My bullies in the real world seemed like newborn puppies compared to Tommit and Drayben.

I was growing more desperate by the day.

Tomorrow I will have fittings for my wedding gown. *How was I going to make it thru?* At first my knee-jerk reaction was to run. Then my heart stopped me. No matter what I suffered— if I disappeared, then Evver’s punishment would certainly be dead. Drayben didn’t mince words. He had told me when I was “chosen” to be Tommit’s bride what would happen if I didn’t happily comply. My skin crawled, thinking about Tommit’s touch. I rolled over to watch her sleep; it pleased me to see her chest rising and falling peacefully.

I had never had a sister or even a close friend.

At seventeen, the feelings I had for the tiny girl, were so new. In the short time I had known her I had grown to love her immensely. My heart swelled. I knew I would suffer any torture, endure any pain to keep her safe. Perhaps I could ask for her freedom as my wedding gift.

Yes.

If I had to endure Tommit’s touch I could deal with it to save her.

Never would I have thought at seventeen years old that I would be trying on wedding gowns and thinking of my fiancé. *I wanted true love.* The type of love that your heart stops because he touches you, when you look at each other and there is no one else on the planet. It was the way I felt about Cassius. Growing up I had heard stories about love at first sight. All my life I thought people were making it up; love at first sight. It had to be a *complete impossibility.*

How could you love someone, who you hadn’t known forever?

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My feelings for him had turned into another wish that I would have sent down my wishing well. I was coming to accept my fate it made it easier watching Evver now. Cassius wouldn't be storming the castle on his white horse with his steel sword raised. It was too dangerous. I wouldn't want him to risk his precious life for mine. Knowing him and Evver were safe and alive could get me through anything.

Evver was sleeping fitfully.

I wondered what her dreams were showing her. Wanting to get up and soothe her but I was well aware the anger that would ensue if she realized my subterfuge. I gently rose out of my bed and found my way to my window seat. I looked over the kingdom I would soon be queen over. It was strange, as I had only been in the town square once and that was in the middle of the night. I longed to wander the streets during the day to check out the shops or to stop to talk to those around me.

It had been daylight when I was carried thru the kingdom by the smelly Cronan.

A trip I was grateful to have slept thru. There were no memories. I didn't want to imagine the faces of the people seeing the towering troll carrying me like a sack of potatoes. I could see lights from the window fires burning on touches around the kingdom. I was left wondering where Cass laid his head tonight. *Was he thinking of me? Or did he sleep restfully relieved I was soon to marry Tommit?*

My heart ached to see his face, feel his touch one more time.

Part of me longed to flee into the midnight air, to have even a moment of freedom. The thought of being free from all the watchful eyes called to me. I wondered if I would ever be allowed to walk out in the open in the town square on my own. *Would I always be a prisoner?* I continued staring off into the twinkling night. My heart was heavy with possibilities, so many questions, it was completely overwhelming. My heart shuddered at the surprising touch.

I turned to see Evver with her hands placed firmly on her hips. The look in her eyes reminded me of the many times my mother had caught me sneaking out of bed to watch my favorite show.

“Aurora_ What are you doing?”

“Sorry Evver. I just couldn’t sleep.” She looked at me with compassion as she sat across from me on the window seat.

“What’s going thru your mind?” I looked at the girl I loved, would give my life for, my happiness for. She seemed to be reading my thoughts.

“You can tell me Aurora, I’m here for you.” Hearing her concern caused tears to start forming. Reaching her arms out to hug me she settled into my chest. The love she showed me was unlike anything I had ever experienced.

Hugging her, she had her diminutive head resting against my heart.

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“Oh Evver, I just hate it. I hate that you’re not out there flying and being a happy child. I hate how I’m being forced to marry someone who I despise. I hate how everyone is being treated in Paradan. I just hate it.” Evver was nestled against me listening to my heart beat. After a moment she replied.

“Cas is going to fix this. He will. *He will save us.*” Her voice broke. Then with just a whisper “*He will.*”

Chapter 12

All alone in the eerie darkness of the unlit room, sat Evver.

The castle was void of any of the usual bustling or noise. As far as she could tell it was just past the darkest hour of the night. She was certain Cassius would be here soon. Although she was still unsure, of what she was going to tell him. Aurora had changed in the past day. Evver knew she was frightened, but there was more to it and she was staying mum about it. Aurora trembled when Evver told her how she was going to meet Cassius tonight.

Young Evver had to wait until she was sure that Aurora slept.

Was it unrealistic for her to want Aurora and Cassius together? Cassius was her big brother, her hero. Never in her life had he let her down. He had protected her from birth. It was her fault she had been caught and brought to the castle. Cassius warned them to stay at the safe house. They were never to go out unless he was with them. She had thought he was being overprotective. *Learning the hard way is never easy.* There was a noise in the doorway Evver froze. After a moment there was a clicking sound. This caused Evver to breathe in relief. It was something she and Cassius had used to communicate since she was a baby.

Evver responded in kind.

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Footsteps slipped across the floor until they stopped inches from her. Evver reached out and found Cassius' outstretched hand.

*

Feeling her hand in his, was so soothing. He picked her up in a large bear hug. Then he sat on the open bench seat. Using all the tender care he could, he sat Evver across from him.

"Evver," he said in a quiet whisper. "How are you birdie?" His hands tightened around hers. She smiled. Cassius hadn't called her that since she was two years old. She was just starting to learn how to fly. You would think because she was a fairy it would come natural for her. Flying would just happen. Not in Evver's case. Fear of falling had her walking and foregoing the use of her new wings.

Evver had been scared of leaving the ground, she refused to fly. She wouldn't even try it. Cassius finally convinced her she would be safe. He led her deep into the forest to the largest tree. It was a favorite for the kids for climbing and the birds for nesting. Evver climbed on Cassius' back then he made his way up to the top of the tree. She clung to him, pleading for him to head back down.

Carefully he pulled her off his back and sat her on his lap.

For the next four hours they watched as mother birds pushed their babies out of the nest. At first she was horrified, but as time passed she realized what they were doing. They weren't doing it to be mean, they were trying to teach them. The sun was starting to set when she turned to Cassius.

"I think I am ready to try it."

"Go ahead, little birdie." She did and she had never stopped after that moment. Until Tommit had her wings clipped. They were both so thoughtful that they sat in silence for a while. He was playing with her corkscrew curls and she had rested her head in his lap. "Don't worry about me," she pleads fervently.

"I'm your big brother, it's what I do." She smiled. "I will always worry about you birdie."

"I know."

"How's Aurora?" His single question had a million more behind it.

"I don't know. She is scared I know that. But I think she is trying to protect me from the worst of it. Just like someone else I know." She squeezed him. "I'm worried Cas. I think she is giving up. You *have* to save her." This worried Cassius. He could see Aurora was a fighter but something had broken her.

What could it be? Why would she give in to Tommit so easily?

"I am working on it. There won't be a wedding—don't worry."

"You have ten days. Tomorrow, Aurora is being presented to the kingdom. I'm afraid after that, Tommit will win."

Tomorrow? Tommit was moving faster than Cassius and the others thought he would. If he found Ecracias' wishing well then he wouldn't need ten days. They either needed to find it first or they needed enough of the kingdom to rally against him. Tomorrow night they were all meeting up for

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updates. He prayed someone would have good news. There had to be hope in all of the darkness that was threatening to consume them all.

“Have faith little birdie. Now, you better get back. We don’t want anyone catching you out during the night. I love you.” He reached out and hugged her. Cassius felt damp drops on his shoulder. He hated how his sister was hurting and he couldn’t fix the problem with a simple lullaby and a sweet treat. Rubbed Evver’s back while he willed the pain to disappear.

*

“I love you, too.” She released his grasp and shuffled out of the room.

Evver heard him move, almost silently, out of the kitchen. He was gone in a flash. Moving back to Aurora’s new room, she didn’t risk lighting a candle. She had wandered these halls, dozens of times. So she felt comfortable moving into the black of night. Every step was deliberate and quiet not wanting to call attention to herself. She was coming around one of the last hallways when she heard a noise. It was a buzzing sound. Stopping in her tracks, her heart stopped. It was a sound she would never forget.

Fairy wings_

There was a table close by and she hurried to mold herself in the small opening in the bottom.

She was terrified of being found. Evver was startled to hear the sound of a fairy flying. *Had they captured*

someone new? If the Destroyers found her she would be killed on the spot. Evver held her breath and prayed that they wouldn't notice her.

A light was starting to filter in.

Every second that passed it got brighter and brighter.

Who was coming? Would they see her? Would her meeting with Cassius be the reason for her death? She was terrified. Evver could see her life flashing before her eyes. Her family, her life, those she loved, and Aurora. *Aurora what would happen to her if Evver was caught? Would they think Aurora is responsible for her actions? Would she be punished as well?* Tears were starting to build. The light in the hall was growing. She was beginning to see the outline of those entering her space.

She wasn't ready for the wings she saw.

Lote was flying__

Evver couldn't believe her eyes. *How was this even possible? Lote had her wings?* Every second and every moment of the time she had spent with the motherly woman was in question now. *Had it all been a lie? Could she be working with Tommit and Drayben?* Evver shook with fury and fear.

Lote flew by, so caught up in her own thoughts that she never noticed the tiny fairy hidden under the table. She would never know she had been exposed. Evver waited for longer than necessary to free herself from the tight space. Unsure if Lote would be returning, she ran the rest of the way to Aurora's

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room. For the first time tonight luck wasn't on her side. The guard had returned to Aurora's door. He was seated in a chair looking like he had settled in for the remainder of the night. Evver's mind frantically searched for a solution to her latest problem. *How was she going to get past the guard?* Fighting back the tears as they spilled from her beautiful emerald eyes was a losing battle at this point. Times like this she wished for her mother and father. For the time before Tommit shattered their peaceful lives.

Exhaustion was starting to creep into her muscles and mind.

She knew she couldn't fall asleep and then be found here. *Why didn't she listen to Aurora and stay in her room tonight?* It once again came down to the same reason she was in the castle in the first place. She thought she was smart enough, strong enough to be out on her own. Luck turned and the guard had fallen asleep. Relief flooded her body as she slipped past him and opened the door just far enough for her to slip thru. She turned around after shutting the door and exhaled loudly. Only to find Aurora standing feet from her with red-rimmed eyes, hands on her hips and fury and worry in her eyes.

"EVVER_ Where have you been_?_"

Chapter 13

Today I was preparing to be introduced to the kingdom.

I was exhausted after Evver's last night's antics. She had been terrified by her running around last night. She still wouldn't tell me what had gone on but she had promised me she would never do it again. It was enough for me, so I left it alone. It was apparent there was a lot floating around in her mind but I wasn't sure I wanted to know it all. I was consumed with the thought that in just a few hours I would be presented to the kingdom.

Drayben and Tommit had created quite a story about my life and family. I doubted anyone would ask. Most were so afraid of King Tommit and his Destroyers that they would have accepted anyone as their new queen. As for the others? Well they were just thankful to be living comfortably; they would not do anything to jeopardize it.

A gown was delivered for the special event.

It was the color of flowing blood. Over 50 yards of fabric must have been used to make it. In some ways it was like the other gowns. Tight fitted from my chest to my waist and ending with a full bell skirt. However, today this dress had a large train. The fabric was silky and gathered from my waist down

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to the floor. The top was open leaving my shoulders exposed. The golden delicate rope wound its way around my shoulders then it braided down my chest.

My hair had taken over an hour.

Most of it was left down and curled. I still didn't get how they managed those curls without a curling iron. The same golden rope accented with rubies was braided into my hair. It formed a half crown on the back of my head. A matching ruby necklace touched my naked collarbone. No detail was overlooked. My shoes were the same color of crimson, heels which tied from my ankles to my mid calf with the matching golden rope. None of it was certainly made for my comfort.

The gown was made as a prop in Drayben and Tommit's quest for power.

I couldn't sit down and breathing was an afterthought. My large diamond weighed heavily on my hand and heart. The final piece was the crown. It was simple and it surprised me. Golden spires each had rubies perched on top of spires that then encircled my head.

The whole effect was dazzling.

I felt strong, regal and stunning.

Evver's eyes were glued to my every movement. Her eyes were large and red-rimmed saucers threatening to spill over at any moment. Evver was so sure Cassius would come to my rescue. Watching me prepare to be introduced to the kingdom was soul crushing for her. I hadn't seen Cassius for two days.

After how I treated him I couldn't blame him for staying away. I was certain he would never darken my doorway again.

It pained me, but after Drayben's visit I knew I had no other choice. *To protect him*, I would have *done anything, say anything*. Seeing the pain that touched his eyes was like a sharpened knife slicing its way into my already weeping heart.

I could handle my pain, my fate even.

Another reason Evver was struggling was I had been assigned a new guard. It was *Zieg*.

She had been having night terrors ever since. He arrived to take me to the viewing area. Tommit was already there waiting for me. Evver followed behind Zieg not trusting him for even a moment. I could hear her whimper every few moments. I tried to talk her into staying behind, but she refused. *She could be so stubborn sometimes*.

Tommit was on the balcony off of his room.

He was being worshiped and praised by those in the large crowd in the courtyard. He reveled in the attention. Most of the assembly was human, but there were a few trolls mixed in attendance for crowd control. Tommit was dressed to impress everyone— but me. His blonde waves were shining and his goatee was darker than I remembered. He was wearing black pants and a red dress uniform coat. It was the exact color of my blood red dress. Gold buttons went down his chest and held his wrist cuffs together. Medals adorned his chest and black shiny leather boots finished the effect. It was dramatic and I

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was certain anyone would agree that the look was striking. If I wouldn't have known what a smarmy, evil man Tommit was I might have been swayed for a second.

Smiling when he saw me, he reached out his hand for me to take. The familiar look of lust, flashed in his coal colored eyes. I felt the familiar sense of darkness the closer I got to him. I took a deep breath willing my courage to hold. I placed my hand in his. A large lump formed in my throat. Each step into the light signaled a step closer to the end.

Stepping out into the sunlight. . . . The noise was thunderous.

It hurts my ears, but I managed a smile. Hoping it comes off as happy and not the grimace I was feeling. The cheers grew.

"Thank you. Thank you. Now quiet_" Silence filled the square. "I am so grateful to have you all assembled here to share in this joyous occasion." More cheers were heard.

"Hail King Tommit_"

"Long live the King_"

I couldn't be sure of where the cheers were coming from. Tommit motioned for silence.

"I have called you all here for one very special announcement. I would like to introduce to you my lovely betrothed. People of Paradan I present your future Queen, Aurora." He took his left arm pulling

me to the edge of the open balcony. There was a roar from the crowd. My eyes tried to focus on their faces but I couldn't.

*

Cassius watched from the gallery. His eyes were glued to his beloved Aurora. Every time he saw her she grew more beautiful. Today was no different, except today she looked the part of the Queen. He had fallen harder than he had thought possible for her. The last moments he spent with Aurora echoed in his mind. She had been so distant. He was certain she cared for him perhaps— not as much as he cared for her.

But that didn't matter.

Evver was hoping Cassius would fix it all. She was naïve in believing he could save the world. He was trying and he was willing to die trying, if that is what it took, but he wouldn't let Tommit survive this. There have been groups already rallying out there in support against Tommit. Aurora would be the perfect queen. She was kind, loving, gentle and compassionate to all with which she came in contact with.

Anyone who had the opportunity to see her could see the beauty of her soul shining thru today.

Aurora's eyes, were tight and her smile, guarded and forced. Those in the crowd would never notice, but Cassius knew every single expression, every movement she made told a story. When he had seen her last, she was frightened. Not only did she push him away but there was more to it. It was true he didn't know Aurora's story.

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She had been evasive from the beginning.

Cassius could see the underlying pain in her tortured eyes. Tonight they were meeting for updates. He was hoping for good news. First Cassius was going to save her from Tommit and then he would find out her story. Maybe then he could make the pain in her gaze disappear forever. The crowd was starting to quiet down. King Tommit loved the applause and all of the cheers. He seemed annoyed when it started to end so quickly. So, taking things into his own hands he pulled Aurora into an unexpected kiss.

The crowd went wild__ Cassius felt fury, surging through him; with all the strength left in him he forced himself to stay frozen in place.

*

My stomach heaved; I quickly forced myself to recover.

I fought the instinct to punch him full in the jaw. My hands were clenched into fists and were pleading to extend into his smug jaw. Never in my life had I wanted to physically hurt someone more than I wanted to hurt Tommit. Tommit's lips felt unnatural and slimy. When I tried to pull away, he only pulled me closer. *The crowd loved it.*

Finally when our lips separated he laughed darkly in my ear. He relished my discomfort. Pleasure washed over his arrogant features. *I hated him.* With every cell of my body I hated the man who I was going to marry.

“I look forward to you all getting to know “*MY*” beloved Aurora.” His possessive words tortured me. “Our wedding will be unlike anything the kingdom has ever seen. In ten days Paradan will have a new queen to stand by my side.” Sounds erupted, horns blared and people were shouting. But Tommit’s words echoed in my ears. He continued to speak but my ears had stopped communicating with my brain.

My smile remained and numbness set in.

I was going to have to find a way of dealing with my future *husband.* I cringed internally at the reality of the word. I looked toward Tommit. He was basking in the glow of victory. At times he reminded me of a neurotic, self absorbed, greedy megalomaniac politician. He would do anything it took to retain his power.

Tommit didn’t care, who he hurt or whose life he destroyed in the process. I was beginning to believe that he enjoyed the destruction that was left in his wake of conquest the most. He pulled me into another embrace. This time I was prepared for what was coming up. Tensing my muscles and forcing my lips to be hard, I resisted the urge to bite him.

Chapter 14

We walked back into Tommit's bedroom. I found it odd that he chose this balcony to make the announcement. There were at least ten others he could have chosen. The room was twice the size of my new room. The windows were draped in golden satin fabric which puddled on the ground. There were lavish couches placed in two of the corners of the room. In the center of the bedroom sat the bed.

It was the largest bed I had ever seen.

It looked like two king size beds had been put together and then a massive headboard in the shape of a large crown sat at the top. It was gold in color and was polished, until it shone. Part of me wondered if it was the real thing? The crest of Paradan was engraved in the middle of the headboard. Long golden satin drapes hung from the ceiling adding to the cozy feel of the bed. Dozens of red and gold pillows topped the bed in satins, velvets, and minks covered them. The comforter was blood red and had the same golden rope my dress and hair was adorned with, at this very moment.

It was beautiful and I longed to touch it and feel if it was in fact, as soft, as it looked.

There were hand carved dressers and night stands which had incredible detail. I was amazed at the quiet elegance the whole room had. For a moment I could forget how the room belonged to the monster— who would soon be my husband. Whoever had put this room together had done it with great care. I wondered if this room had belonged to the previous Kings.

Tommit had noticed my fascination with the stunning bed. “You like?” He smiled at me seductively.

“It’s marvelous.” I admitted reluctantly.

“No worries, my beauty. It won’t be long before we will share it as man and wife.” I flushed at his suggestive coo. A flash of anger and disgust hit me. I wanted to tell him, he was the last person on the planet I would want to share a bed with. I bit my tongue so hard that I tasted blood, just so I could betray my true feelings.

Stepping toward me, his left hand fingered my ruby necklace.

“So *beautiful*.” I had the feeling he wasn’t talking about my necklace as his eyes flamed with lust. My heart quivered in fear. His fingers played with the middle stone. My breath caught was in my chest. Tommit’s fingers traveled down to my collarbone and then to my throat. I closed my eyes not wanting to be present in this moment.

This was my fate, my way of protecting those I loved, Evver and Cassius.

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I felt Tommit's lips touched my bare throat. My heart was telling me to run as far and fast as I could from the monster in front of me. My head, however, told me this was the choice I had made. Choosing Evver and Cassius, over my happiness, this was the price I had to pay to secure their safety.

"Excuse me_" The voice was loud and forceful. I didn't have to look, as I knew the voice by heart. We both turned toward the open doorway to see Evver standing there. Her brow was furrowed in determination. Hands were on her hips in irritation.

"*What is it child_*" Tommit barked in annoyance. I was sure it would have sent anyone else cowering into a corner— but not Evver. Instead she stood stronger and taller than I thought possible of the tiny fairy.

"Your highness Aurora is due for her gown fitting." My lungs were screaming but my throat had closed off my air supply. "Sorry sire, but if she missing the fitting, then her wedding gown won't be ready in time for the big day." Her words filtered in.

"Fine." Tommit took one last glance in my direction before heading back out to the balcony to see if there were more cheers to be had. Evver rushed in and grabbed my hand pulling me through the open door. I still wasn't sure what had just happened. Evver had saved me at least for today from the inevitable. She had faced a lion treating it like a spoiled kitten instead. My body was still in shock so Evver

had the ability to drag me easily thru the hallways. Instead of her taking me to my new room she took me to her old room.

The storage closet.

She pushed me quickly inside and shut the door behind her. This room was oddly comforting to me. After all it was the place I had first met Evver.

"Did he hurt you?" Her voice was strained and hard. A loud hysterical laugh escaped my lips without my permission. I struggled to get control of my erratic emotions, biting my lip to stop any other outbursts I would be sorry that escaped. I paused for a moment before speaking hoping my voice would be calm and controlled. I tried to remember I was speaking to a child. It was true that most of the time she seemed more like an adult than a child; Evver had survived more than most had in their entire life.

"He didn't hurt me Evver. I'm fine. I promise." Her body relaxed a little. She still looked at me with suspicion. "Please come here." I opened my arms to her inviting her in. She reluctantly settled in. I knew she was still upset but I could never blame her for feeling like that.

She sat silently for a while.

Chapter 15

Cassius paced nervously.

He knew he was early. Anxious and afraid, both described his feelings as he tried to focus. Seeing Aurora on the balcony today had made it all the more real to him. Before his mind had known Aurora's soon to be fate. His heart had an inkling of an idea, but when he saw Tommit put his hands and lips on Aurora. . . . It nearly destroyed him. The fury he felt threatened to consume him. Cassius' skin burned with rage. He wanted to charge the castle and rip Aurora from Tommit's slippery grasp.

The moon was starting to descend.

Cassius prepared himself, for the arrival of the others. He had to show a strong front for everyone else. If he faltered or showed any weakness, then they would surely second-guess themselves. They would wonder if they were strong enough to defeat Tommit. He couldn't allow that to happen. There were sounds of someone approaching. He froze.

If the Destroyers, or Cronan found him, then all would be lost.

Cassius crouched down, listening to whether it was, friend or foe. He heard a familiar bird call. It had become their call, alerting others there were friends near. Cassius thought of it after talking to Evver.

He recalled of the time when they had watched the birds learning to take flight. So now the Rebels used the call of the Macan. It was a mix between a Macaw and a Raven; it was a large parrot that had a black feathered belly and rainbow wings and back. Their heads each had a tuft of black feathers just above their eyes. They had always been his father's favorite bird. It was his way of paying tribute to him.

Cassius prepared to welcome friends. He was shocked to see his brother Abow walking up with Bacra, one of the other giant's. He hadn't seen him in a Rime's time, maybe even longer. When Abow saw him he rushed to him. Then he picked him up and put him in a large bear hug.

"Wow, buddy__ You're crushing me." He said gasping for breath.

"Sorry." Abow dropped him to the ground. He ducked his head sheepishly. Abow was constantly forgetting how strong he was. Cassius maybe the oldest brother but Abow dwarfed him in size and strength.

"What are you doing here?" Cassius tried to be mad but looking at his big smiling face made it hard. "Where's Ember?"

"Did I hear my name?" Ember who was the spitting image of Evver flew around Bacra landing next to Abow. She had long out of control red curly hair which flew in every direction. Her shining, bright jade green eyes always danced with mischief. Her wings fluttered to a stop in front of her scowling big brother. For a moment Cassius panicked seeing his little sister and brother out in the open like this.

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"EMBER_" He growled.

"Come on Cas. I couldn't miss out on all of the fun. Could I?"

"FUN? Ember, you make me crazy_ None of this is fun_" he reached out pulling her into a hug.

He held her tight. She tried wiggling out of the embrace.

"Cas_" She whined and he laughed. He released her; in some ways it was a relief to see her. At least now he knew she and Abow were safe. It had been so dangerous lately he didn't even dare contact them. He was certain that he would be followed and he would lead the Destroyers to their hiding place.

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"How's Evver?" She asked regaining her focus. Ember studied his face. She could always tell when he was leaving things out to protect them. Today she wasn't going to let him get away with it.

"Evver's fine. She's worried, but she's doing well." Ember studied him for a minute. It was apparent he was telling the truth, but she could see that he was leaving a huge hole in his answer. The reason they were forming here tonight.

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"And?"

"And what Ember?" he asked irritated. He hated it when she looked at him that way. Ember, could have beaten the Cheshire cat in a grinning match.

"Come on Cas. You're missing something big. . . . Aurora?" he flushed. This was all new to him.

That included being teased by his little sister about a girl. It left him flustered.

"Aurora?" He asked, already knowing the answer. Ember had always been filled with questions.

She would ask questions from daybreak until twilight. Then she would start over the next day. It drove

him crazy but he humored her because she was his little sister. He loved her.

"Tell me Cas. What's she like?"

What was Aurora like? Where would he even begin? She was beautiful, smart, loving, kind. . . .

there was so much to her and he had barely scratched the surface of who Aurora was. So Cassius took

the easy route.

"You will meet her soon enough. Then you can tell me what you think," he said with a wink. She

started to argue with him but was stopped short by the arrival of the others. They gathered around the

same large toadstool. The attitudes around the circle were mixed. Cassius was happy to see they were

doubled in numbers from their first meeting.

There were a lot of newcomers gathered with the others.

It gave Cassius hope that they may actually be able to pull this off. If enough of them stood up to

Tommit, then they had a chance of bringing Tommit down and *saving Aurora*. Noticeably missing, were

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Trix and Tiden. He wondered if they were safe, if they had made it to Fara yet. Unease filled his heart, thinking of the many fates which could befall his brave friends.

“Thank you all for coming. I want to welcome all of our new friends gathered here tonight. We will start with updates around the circle and then we will discuss what our next step will be from there.

Bontox, would you like to go first?”

The apprehensive troll stood.

He was shorter than most trolls’ standing at only six feet. He was the product of a mixed family as well. Dark blonde hair covered his hands and parts of his smooth face. His nose was more human than troll but his ears made up for it they were larger than most and took up most of the space of his head. Bontox normally had a permanent scowl on his face but he was a tender hearted guy in reality.

“I . . . um . . . I can report they have found, one of the Para’s.” Gasps trickled around the circle. He held out his hands trying to take the shock away from his words, “Good news is there is still no headway on the well. Tommit has increased the numbers of trolls out searching for it. Between the Destroyers and the extra trolls they will have the kingdom scoured by the day of the wedding.” Low murmuring could be heard from the others discussing this turn of events. They were all concerned, rightfully so.

“Thank you, Bontox. We can all agree that this is disturbing. Legend has it that the Para’s were magically protected. The simple fact they have already found one is not a good sign of things to come.

Kabex, would you like to go next?”

Kabex climbed on top of the toadstool so the others could get a good look at him. He was one of the original dwarfs it appeared he had brought about six others with him tonight. Kabex stood just over two feet tall and had bright red cheeks and a prominent round belly, which shook when he laughed and set him apart from the others. White blond curls littered his head were hidden by his stocking cap, which gave him a childlike appearance even though he was close to one hundred years old.

“I can say the remaining dwarves are willing to do what it takes to rid Paradan of Tommit.

Everyone I have spoken with is out there now, searching out more to stand against him. We are close to five hundred strong in just three days. I am sure the numbers will just grow from here. We all have friends or family who have died or gone missing. None of us are willing to let this pass unpunished.” Kabex climbed back down to his waiting tree stump. His somber words had quieted the crowd. They all had lost loved ones as well.

The mood had changed amongst the rebels.

Anger had been something they had all felt since Tommit had started his cleansing of Paradan.

Now, it was something that fed them all, they would not stop this until he was ripped from the throne.

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There wasn't a single soul seated in the quiet darkness who hadn't suffered loss or pain at the hand of King Tommit. They had all experienced heartache at Tommit's, Drayben's or their Destroyers hands.

Cassius stood. He waited a moment before speaking hoping his words would relay the magnitude of his feelings. Looking out at the firefly lit circle he saw friends, family and his own brother and sister. The thought of them joining the fight was hard for him to swallow.

In reality, they had all joined this fight the moment their father had been killed.

"My heart is heavy tonight. We all are aware of the fight we have in store for us. Even though failure is *not an option*, it is a terrifying—*possibility*. We must all stand together and push fear out of our hearts and minds. We must not sleep until we have found the wishing well. It will save Paradan, Aurora and all of us. Most may have believed it was only a legend, but we could all learn from our ancestors. The mistakes they made were a warning to us. If we fail to recognize this then we are to blame. I can't reiterate, just how important it is to build our numbers. Kabex, I am pleased to hear your numbers are so high already. *That is promising*. We are going to need as many as we can possibly gather if we are to fight against the Destroyers and Cronan. We are all painfully aware how important this is. Failure can't be even a fleeting thought for any of us. Our lives, our families, and our children's futures depend on what we do in these next few weeks. If we fail . . ." Cassius paused overcome with emotion. "*If we fail then we will have no future.*"

Most were nodding in thoughtful agreement. Cassius's head dropped in exhaustion.

"Remember, there may be no cavalry coming to our rescue. We don't know if Tiden and Trix made it to Fara and if they did, there is no way to tell if they found any friends there. Tommit could have help from other kingdoms. None of us even know where Tommit came from. He could have been a plant from another kingdom from the beginning. *We just don't know.* Unfortunately—there is no known heir to King Windom. I wish there was. That would make this process so much easier for all the people of Paradan. *I am grateful for the bravery and strength of each one of you.* We will return in two moons' time. I pray for all of our safety until then. God bless and god speed my friends."

Cassius stepped back and waited for the crowd to disperse. He was so tired. Thinking of it he couldn't really remember the last time he slept restfully.

Abow and Ember made their way forward.

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Ember's eyes were tight and full of concern for her brother. She had been filled in on how bad things were but like Evver she believed they were just overstating things to keep her in hiding. She could see the fear in Cassius' eyes. There had been rumors; but she tended to think most people liked to over exaggerate. Ember, was worried about him. His normally bright and clear icy blue eyes were cloudy and dark. Cassius always had been the strong one in the family. As big brothers went, he was the best. He

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stood up to anyone who would dare look cross-eyed at any of them. Cas, was loving and fun, always willing to play anything their hearts were set on.

It was true he was the only human in their mixed family, but it never bothered any of them.

Abow was two steps ahead of her. She watched him and Cassius. They had always had a way of speaking without saying a single word out loud. All it took was a simple glance between them. It used to drive Ember crazy. She remembered when they were younger and they would show off this “talent”.

Evver or Ember would tell one of them a word, a phrase or even a number. Then both Cassius and Abow would sit on their hands; it was extremely comical to see a giant try to sit on their hands. The other would then guess correctly every time.

Ember could see one of these “conversations” was taking place, now between her two brothers. How she wished, they would entrust her with the information they were sharing. Ember knew they were constantly trying to protect her. Especially after Evver was captured and her wings were clipped. Knowing how his precious little sister would never fly again had nearly destroyed Cassius. When he realized he was too late and her wings had already been clipped by Tommit’s Destroyers he vowed it would never happen to Ember.

So, now he kept secrets from those he loved and he hid his pain from Ember and everyone else.

She hated it. Abow finally spoke.

“We got this.” Abow slapped him on the back. The force of it sent Cassius flying into the soggy ground. Abow laughed heartily. Nevit flew over and landed on Abow’s shoulder. Nevit was Ember’s best friend. She was the opposite of Ember. Midnight black hair that was short cropped and super curly. It was shaped like Rotinni and sprung out in every direction from her tiny head. Nevit’s skin was the color of burnt caramel. Ember and Nevit had been inseparable since they met at only two years old. It didn’t surprise Cassius to see her next to Ember.

Nevit was laughing as was Ember.

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Cassius had to laugh in spite of himself. He was covered from head to toe in thick black mud and he looked the most inhuman he had ever had been.

He laughed until the laughter turned to tears.

Chapter 16

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Evver had been gone for almost an hour.

It was the longest she had left me alone in days. She was gathering things she thought I would need for the coming week. It was full of visits with who knows who and talking to who cares about who.

I was so tired of it all.

It was as if my life was a movie playing on fast forward. Every day that passed felt like less than an hour in time. My wedding day was coming sooner than I was prepared for. *I would never be prepared for it.* I was coming to grips with my new reality. *If it meant saving those I loved than wasn't any sacrifice worth the cost?*

I was basically locked in my room most of the time.

The only time I was allowed out was for "appointments" Drayben and Lote made for me, as well as the occasional dinner with Tommit. Any time I spent with him I felt like I was losing myself. *Darkness was beginning to overcome my soul.*

I was beginning to feel so alone.

There was nobody I dared confide in.

Of course there was Evver, but I couldn't add to her already weighty burden. It wouldn't be fair to her. I could see pain was slowly starting to eat away at her spirit already.

Everything I loved about her was starting to slip away from the little girl I loved so much. I wondered about my family in the real world. *Had they given up the search already? Had there been a funeral?*

My heart ached to think of the pain my family had experienced. I was certain my tormentors had probably celebrated my disappearance. I wondered if they had already found a new target. *Was somebody else suffering because of my disappearance down the well? Why did life have to be so unfair?* I had heard bad things happened to good people. These words rang truer now than ever before. During my time in Paradan I had grown to love those I had gotten to know.

Evver, then there was sweet Kazor, Simit, Reber, and Cassius. I could name many others, but there were also others I hated with a deep passion. Drayben, Cronan, the Destroyers and Tommit I never knew such feelings of hatred were possible within my heart. A soft knock at my door sounded. I straightened my dress and then made my way toward the door. Prepping myself for anyone behind the thick door, I took a deep breath before opening.

"Lote?" She smiled widely.

"Hello dear. May I come in?"

I opened the door wider allowing her to come in. She still made me feel uneasy. I left the door open an inch. For some reason, it made me feel safer. She walked over to my large window that looked

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over the kingdom and settled there. Her eyes gleamed when she looked at the view. I knew it was a beautiful sight.

I had never been to her room, so I was unsure if she had any view at all.

"Beautiful!" She remarked. Lote meant it as a compliment but there was ice in her tone.

"Yes, it is. Paradan is lovely."

She continued to stare out at the bustling kingdom. I wondered what it looked like before Tommit's hand touched it. I would love to look out over the same view and see giants, fairies, dwarves, and yes even trolls, wandering around the cobblestone walkways. The leaves were starting to change it was my favorite time of year. I was certain there weren't going to be any jack-o-lanterns or trick or treating this year. Lote turned a hard touch to her eyes as she looked at my latest dress.

"I see you received more dresses. It is lovely. A gift from King Tommit?" I nodded my heart beating rapidly. Whenever she was near, I wondered if she had the ability to exchange my heart for hummingbird's wings. Lote shook me whenever she looked or even spoke a single syllable to me. *Why did she have this effect on me?* I know she didn't have the same effect on anyone else. *So why me?*

"The King is quite taken with you. You should be honored." She scanned my eyes wondering if I was. I was thankful she couldn't really see my true feelings for the monster king. *"Aurora, you have a great responsibility to the people of Paradan. They will respond to your example. So many will be spared"*

unnecessary, shall I say, “unpleasantness” if you behave yourself.” She reminded me of Drayben. Her eyes raised and I could tell she was measuring, if her threat had landed.

It had landed right in the center of my heart.

“Of course, Lote.”

She smiled. Lote started walking around the room. Touching the fine fabrics of the draperies, comforter and then running her fingers over the pillows. Then her hand rested on one of the legs of my canopy. She looked like an evil fairy queen, the way the light hit her wings as it shimmered thru the gossamer then struck the golden legs. It lit the back of her giving her a dark halo effect.

My door opened it was Evver.

She was sweating. Something I had only seen her do once before she must have been running. Her face turned ashen white when she saw Lote at the top of my bed. Evver’s gaze quickly searched out for me. I had made my way over to the corner of the window seat. She relaxed an infinitesimal amount when she saw I was still in one piece. I was unsure why but whenever Lote’s name had been mentioned in the past few days Evver was different. She was no longer the cheerleader to which I had grown accustomed to. Part of me liked the new Evver. I hoped this part of her had started to pick up on the unease I felt. Another part of me worried.

Evver rushed to my side.

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Putting herself between Lote and myself, her eyes were blazing. *It scared me.* In the little time I had known Evver I had seen her in many moods, but now she was—frightening. She looked like a lioness ready to charge. Lote couldn't help but notice her strong reaction also. It made her smile with a smugness I had never seen from her. She quickly covered.

"Evver, how are you dear? I was just checking in with Aurora. It seems as if everything is in order here. I will let you two get back to the things you need to do in order to prepare for the dinner tonight. I expect you to be ready when Drayben arrives. It would be extremely improper if you were to make him wait at . . . *all!*"

Her hand ran down the leg of my bed and then over the pillow. She patted the pillow and then ran her hand over the comforter as she walked around the bed. She blatantly ignored Evver; even as she stood rigid and strong in front of me. I wondered if she even cared. She glided out of the room as if she had just dropped by to say hi.

Evver didn't relax until my door had closed completely and there was silence on the other end. Then she turned to me. Her eyes were still wild.

"Don't trust her_" her words rushed out of her mouth like razor sharp knives.

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The rest of the afternoon was spent preparing me for my dinner with Tommit tonight.

I had long past referring to him as King unless in his, Drayben or Lote's company. I am in another new dress tonight it was the color of raw corn. Pale yellow silk it was beautiful. It was embroidered with flowers covering the entire dress. It must have taken someone hours upon hours of tedious hand work to finish it. As with most of my gowns my shoulders were exposed to the world. I had become accustomed to this. I was wearing a diamond necklace that clung to which my neck. It was made of single diamonds in almost a chain encircling my neck. Then at my throat it cascaded down like a waterfall. My hair was left completely down for the first time, it was in finger curls.

A large diamond headpiece was secured on the right side of my head.

I was surprised at how even without make-up they were able to make my cheeks glow and my eyes shine. To finish it off they used a rose's petals to color my lips. I was stunned when I looked in the mirror that Evver provided for me.

My breath had caught in my throat.

Never in my life, had I ever thought I was capable of looking like this. I hated how it was being wasted on my fiendish fiancé. A thought danced in my mind. *How would my eyes shine if I was going to see Cassius instead of Tommit?*

Just the thought of the boy I loved had my eyes sparking and my cheeks flushed.

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My heart rate increased and my temperature rose several degrees. I knew the answer to my query. It wouldn't matter. Evver insisted on taking me down to the dining hall today. She refused to leave my sight. I decided to not fight her. Evver's tiny feet led the way toward the dimly lit dining hall.

As I entered in the large dark room, a gloomy cloud came over me.

Any joy I would have felt was ripped from me at the sight of Tommit's smarmy smile. I was used to the leering and the lust filled eyes. Evver walked me toward the end of the table then stepped aside, so I could take my place in front of the vile king. He stood up and reached out for my hand.

"You, look lovely, Aurora." His compliment had my skin crawling.

"Thank you, *your majesty*."

"Have a seat please. You may leave." He waved his hand at Evver dismissing her with just a small gesture. "Please sit here, Aurora. I'm sure the staff has prepared a lovely meal for us. We will be able to talk about our plans for the next week." I sat as I had been told and worried about what he was planning for me this week.

"Now I have been informed that you are unable to ride a horse. Is this accurate?"

"A horse?" I asked in surprise. "No. I have never ridden before."

"After we have our ceremony, it is tradition for the king and queen to ride thru the kingdom on horseback. It is a way for the people to be able to catch a glimpse of their new queen. As you can see that

this could be problematic, with your *inability* to ride. I want you to look like a queen as you ride; not as a fool. Kirge, bring him in." My stomach dropped. *What new terror did he have walking toward me?* My breath caught in my throat. I could hear the footsteps behind me. I couldn't bring myself to look. The footsteps merely feet behind me. I could hear someone move as they stopped.

I was guessing they were bowing to his royal obnoxiousness.

"I have a challenging job for you. My bride to be, is unable to ride a horse. I would like you to make her a professional in the next few days. By the end of the week, I want to see it. I have instructed Kirge to give you any allowances that you will need to make it happen. Can you do this?" There was a quiet pause.

"Of course, your highness."

Tears stung my eyes.

I knew that voice. I would always know that voice. *Cassius*. More than anything my head wanted to whip around in his direction, but I couldn't I held on to the arms of the chair so tightly, I was certain I left nail marks underneath. *How was this happening? Tommit was asking me to spend time with Cassius?*

"Aurora, my beauty, I would like you to meet my *stable boy* Cassius." I realized now was the acceptable time to turn around and take in his radiant face. Turning, I was again struck by the strength of

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his features, and the kindness in his eyes. He was an award winning actor, not betraying for a second how we already knew one another. Cassius bowed deeply to me.

“My lady.”

My heart rushed. I nodded trying to act disinterested. It was going to be impossible looking at him so I turned back to the despicable Tommit. He was caught up in leering at me so there was no chance of him realizing the flush in my face was due to Cassius and not because of him. He raised an eyebrow at me, trying to look at me seductively but it came across as inept. *A raging rhinoceros would have been sexier to me.* I managed a wan smile.

“Very good.” He turned to Cassius. I was jealous that he got to look at Cassius, while I was stuck looking at his monstrous face. “Aurora will begin riding lessons in the morning. I expect you to treat her with gentle care. Not a hair on her beautiful head will be harmed, understand?” His voice was threatening and my blood cooled several degrees.

A familiar lump formed in my throat.

“I promise sire, she will be safe with me.” His words warmed me from the pit of my stomach. I turned my gaze to the food on my plate feigning disinterest. “My lady, I will see you in the morning. Your majesty.” Cassius bowed and turned to leave the room. Tommit’s attention returned to me and only me. We finished our dinner all the while I tried to keep him talking but he was more interested with fondling

my arm and neck. Every time he would try to make dinner conversation out of either, I would stuff my face with the rich food.

I had made myself sick by the time dinner was over. I was lucky enough when Drayben showed up with something urgent to discuss with Tommit.

“My apologies my dear, I will look forward to hearing all about your day tomorrow. I will see you at dinner tomorrow evening.” He leaned over and kissed my right cheek. Tommit lingered a little too long for my comfort, as his breath was heated and smelled of fish. *How I despised him.* I dreamed of a day when the Dragons had a bar-b-que, featuring my fiancé as the main course.

“Good night.” I was led back toward my room by a guard with which I was unfamiliar with. He was smaller than the others and he walked with a slight limp. Normally fear cursed through me whenever I roamed the halls with any of the castle guards. Today this was different. I felt soothed and safe walking through the now familiar corridors of my new home. We walked in silence for most of the walk back to my room. I was deep in my thoughts and had missed his slight detour. My mind was still playing over what had just transpired in the dining hall. Part of me was concerned.

How was I going to spend time with Cassius over and over and not let my resolve falter?

Just one look in his eyes had left me rethinking my decision not to fight against my engagement. The guard opened the door at the end of the hall. It took me a moment to understand that we were in a

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different hallway than I was expecting. He opened the door and held it open inviting me in. I looked into his eyes. They were a warm chocolate brown and reminded me of my grandfathers. I took the step inside.

It was like stepping into Heaven.

The room was covered from floor to ceiling with books. Most of them were arranged in alphabetic order in bookcases. It was a beautiful sight. I had always been a reader. Even from the first time I was able to open up a book I was transported to a new world with each turn of the page. I turned to look at the guard. He smiled at me and opened his arms encouraging me to explore the room. For a few moments, I forgot where I was.

I turned to the guard. "Thank you. Why?"

"Someone thought that you might need a little distraction."

"Who?"

"A friend."

"May I ask your name?"

"Of course, dear child. I am Tartan."

"Tartan? I am so thankful for your kindness." I stepped toward him, looking at his eyes. His smile was crooked and crinkly around the corners. His brown eyes sparkled like a Christmas elf that just got away with pulling off the biggest Christmas surprise. It made me giggle. "Tartan, I don't understand.

Who's the friend? And why would you do this? I know..." I stopped myself short from saying how

Drayben would be upset if he thought I was having any fun at all.

He chuckled deeply.

"Just because I am a castle guard, doesn't mean that I am not blind to the outside world Miss. I am going to do what I can, when I can, to make your life a little easier here. Now, how do you think that," his voice grew conspiring, "his majesty found out that you were unable to ride a horse? It wasn't a little bird who told him," I wanted to cry. Tears burned my eyes.

Without thinking, I reached out and hugged him.

"Thank you." He patted my back to comfort me. We stepped back and looked at each other.

"Now, you just need to promise to stay strong. It is not over. You may feel alone in your fight but trust me. . . . There are many out there who are doing all they can to make sure you get your real *happy ever after*." I couldn't help it the tears started flowing at the words of hope escaping his lips.

"There, there. Better hurry and look around. We need to get back before they realize we took a little detour. Now, hurry." I nodded and quickly took in the books. I settled on two. If I needed to hide them, I could they were small and I didn't want to get my new friend in trouble. He slipped them in the folds of his uniform and then led me back to my cell. . . .I mean my room. Evver was there waiting for

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me. She was pacing the large room. Sighing in relief, she rushed to me. Tartan and her looked each other over, wondering if they were friend or foe. I laughed.

“Evver, I want you to meet my new *friend*, Tartan.” Her eyebrows rose as she studied my face.

Then her eyes started to shine.

“It’s always nice to meet a friend_” She reached her hand out offering it to him. He gladly took it.

Cupping both of her hands in his and patted them gently.

“Likewise Miss Evver. Now I better be off, I will be nearby if you need anything. Please keep a strong heart. Aurora, you have friends who care a great deal about you. Remember you are not alone in this.” He reached into the folds of his uniform and retrieved my books. Then he gently placed them in my hands.

“Thank you, Tartan.” He bowed toward both of us and then made his way out the door. Taking one last glance at us before shutting the door he smiled.

Chapter 17

Drayben followed behind Tommit.

They were headed into Tommit's cave. It was a room in the far corner of his suite. There were no windows in the room and the walls had large rugs hung around the room to muffle the sounds that came out of it. They waited until they were clear from the others and then shut the door. Tommit had candles burning in lanterns constantly and they both sat down on two overstuffed chairs.

"Now what is so important that you would interfere with my time with Aurora?" Tommit asked leaning forward hands entwined.

"We found the second Para."

Tommit's eyes grew with glee. They were getting closer. It wouldn't be long before they found the wishing well. Sitting back in his chair he was pleased with all of the work Drayben had been putting in on their little joint venture. He was someone who was beneficial to keeping around. Drayben was

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ready to do all of the dirty work for him. He didn't need to get his own hands dirty and he was able to reap all of the rewards.

"Marvelous. Has there been any progress on the location of the well?"

"Cronan thinks they are getting closer. They have nearly covered the entire kingdom. Ironically they only have the troll forest left to search." Drayben leaned forward waiting for Tommit's reaction to the news.

"Send whatever help they need. I want that well found__ Take some of the prisoners, if you think it will go faster. It *must be found before my wedding*. Drayben, I want to seal my power and secure the throne before— I marry Aurora."

"You would still marry her if we found the well?" Drayben asked surprised.

"Surprising enough, I have grown fond of her. I find myself *enjoying* my time with her. Who knows, it might be nice to have someone to share my time with off of the throne." Tommit raised his eyebrows and he and Drayben chuckled darkly.

"Yes, she did clean up very rather nicely now, didn't she."

"I look forward to having all of this behind us so that I can have a little *fun*. I grow weary of those who would try to unseat me. *Do they still not understand who I am?* For a moment I would relish the idea of telling them just how their beloved Windom died, such a *stupid, stupid* man." Tommit spat. "You will

never see me make the same mistakes as he did. To think that he thought I was his friend." Tommit darkened. "As if I would ever befriend such a pitiful, pitiful fool_ But I should thank him... if he been more proactive, smarter or even careful than I would not be in my throne today now would I?"

"My king, you would never be so foolish. He didn't deserve to be king. The kingdom is in much more capable hands with you on the throne. Windom squandered his time with the crown. He never saw the bigger picture, like you do. Soon we will be strong enough to overtake Fara and destroy King Calas." The thought brought a sneer to his face.

"I know. Then with the combined forces of Paradan and Fara vengeance will finally be mine. Rartan will never see it coming. Drayben, I can almost taste the sweetness of my impending victory. I'm not going to rest until I have Solin's blood drenched in my hands." Tommit's body was trembling with pent up fury. "No one treats me like that and lives. I am still surprised they haven't figured out who Windom's successor is. I live to see the day when they realize the king who brought down their kingdom is none other than the man Solin stopped from marrying his daughter. *Solin destroyed her and now I am going to destroy him.*"

*

I took Evver's hand and led her to the empty window seat. Her emerald eyes searched mine for answers. I smiled at her trying to reassure her.

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"Who was that?" Her curious eyes probed mine.

"A friend . . . I think." It was still hard to tell who was friend and who was foe.

"Please be careful Aurora. There are many around us that pretend to be on our side, when in fact, it is far from the truth. But trust me . . . they are more snake than swallow." I had never heard it put that way. Something clicked inside my mind.

"Like Lote?" She looked surprised I had noticed. I laughed gently, offending her in the process.

"I'm sorry Evver, but when are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"What do you mean?" she asked her eyes wide and innocent.

"Are you kidding me? Every time Lote comes ten feet near me, you act like she's the devil." She raised her eyebrows at me.

"The devil?"

Ugh_ Sometimes coming from another world was so inconvenient.

"Where I'm from the devil is as scary as they come. Whenever you see, her you look terrified."

Evver looked thoughtful for a moment. Turning her head to look out over the kingdom, she looked torn. I knew more than likely she thought she was protecting me. It occurred to me I was the worst kind of hypocrite. Here I was keeping things from her to protect her, and yet I was unwilling to let her do the same.

I knew it was wrong but I couldn't help it.

"Aurora I'm not sure *if* I should tell you. I found out only by accident. Part of me still wonders if what I saw was real." Looking at the little girl I had grown to love so much I could see the fear holding her back. I was familiar with it. How could I protect her if I didn't know what it was she needed protecting from?

"It will be fine. Whatever it is, we can deal with it together."

"Remember when I went out the other night to meet Cassius? I should have listened to you. On my way back I was trying to make sure no one saw me. I didn't want any questions about where I had been. So I doused my candle and made my way back to your room in the dark. Half way back I heard something familiar. It is a sound that will always know— fairy wings. A fairy was flying in the castle_ I was worried they had caught someone new. I hid worried what would happen if the guards found me. I was so afraid that I hid under a side table." She turned back to the window. I didn't want to pressure her but I was dying for the rest of the story.

"The light grew brighter and I was so frightened. I couldn't believe it_ Here once again I was going to be caught all because I thought I knew better than someone I loved. It wasn't the guards or even the Destroyers. It was Lote_ She was flying."

I couldn't hide my shock.

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I had always thought her wings were different from the others. *They hadn't clipped her wings.* *What did that mean?* I knew my feelings of distrust weren't far off for the aging fairy. I hated how Evver had to be the one to discover her treachery. This had to be even more of a shock to her than myself. Lote had been a trusted confidant to her and the rest of the castle staff. They had trusted her with all they had their thoughts, their feelings and most of all their hearts. She had comforted them when they cried and laughed with them as well. The pain had to be overwhelming.

"Are you sure, Evver?"

She turned back to me; tears filled her large saucer eyes.

"Aurora don't you think I wish it was a dream? I have gone over and over it in my mind. Why wouldn't they clip her wings? What did Lote trade for the chance to continue to fly?" She buried her head in her tiny trembling hands.

I often thought of that day in the south wing.

There was the strange way she looked at me and then the fear her glance inspired deep inside my heart. I knew what she had traded. *It was me.* My whole body tensed. I tried not to show it to Evver. But it was all starting to make sense the way her fairy wings seemed different from all of the other fairy wings.

How they always seemed ready to take off and fly. Now I knew. It was because they were.

I felt sick.

My brain was busy thinking of all the times we had talked in front of her—to her. Terror raced through me, *had we ever talked about Cassius in front of her?* I couldn't remember. My heart was racing and I was starting to shake. No matter how hard I tried to fight it my body was winning the battle. I dropped my head into my lap trying to soothe my breathing. I was certain I was going to throw up. Not even the thought of spending time with Cassius tomorrow was enough to take the dread out of my soul. I felt her miniature fingers played gently with my hair. She started humming a lovely tune.

It was familiar in some way.

I wasn't quite sure but it reminded me of one of the lullabies my grandma used to sing to me when I was very little. I couldn't remember the words but I still remembered the tune. It was so soothing. I would have thought it was impossible but I fell asleep.

*

In my dream I was still in Paradan but I was wearing my normal Oregon clothes.

I had on dark denim jeans and a green Ducks hooded sweatshirt. My high heels were exchanged for my comfortable Nike tennis shoes. My hair was pulled back in a plain pony tail. I felt comfortable in my skin for the first time since landing in Paradan. I was walking along the cobblestone streets in the town square. Life went on as if Tommit had never touched the beautiful land.

Fairies flew from vendor to vendor gathering the food and supplies they needed.

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Giants were playing double dragon hopscotch with several trolls and humans. It seemed unfair to me, seeing how long the legs of a giant are. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves. Walking along I was surprised to feel so at home here. I felt like I have been out just for a morning walk instead of walking in a fairy tale land. I walked with purpose as if I was headed somewhere special. My mind was blank but my feet were on a mission.

A beautiful fairy waved in my direction. "Good morning Aurora."

"Good morning Nevit." I replied with a smile. That was strange.

"Heading home?"

"I think so." Not sure about anything now.

"Would you let Ember know I will be by later today? I will be bringing some Macan eggs with me. I know they are her favorites," she said with a smile.

"Of course I will. Have a lovely day." She nodded and then flew off in the opposite direction. I would never get over the beauty of seeing a fairy fly. They were so graceful, and elegant. My heart warmed thinking of Evver and my family waiting for me.

Part of my mind was completely confused.

It was as if I was living another life in Paradan and apparently I liked this life. I felt happy and free from any stress or pain. I wondered if Cassius was part of this life. I quickened my pace hoping to find the

answers that were eluding me. As I climbed the small incline leading me to the castle door, my feet seemed to suddenly be filled with sand. Every step I tried to take was slowed down to nothing.

The image in front of me started to change.

It was back to the wishing well on the hill in the real world and my feet were working once again.

I looked down into the well and it had been filled with cement.

I screamed.

Chapter 18

I woke up in my bed covered in sweat and all alone.

I started to sob. Not really sure why. *Was I upset I was still here?* Or was I relieved because I was *still* here? I wasn't sure and this made me sob even harder. I cried until there were no more tears left. It

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was then that I realized two things. First thing I was in my bed, how had that happened? Evver was too small to carry me here. *Who had she gotten to lift me?* The thought embarrassed me.

Second was why would I be upset to be home and never be able to come back to Paradan?

After all, I had wished for it in the beginning. My dream had seemed so real. I wanted the life I saw at the start of my slumber. I wanted Paradan to return to its glory before Tommit took control and ruined so many lives. Most of all I wanted to be a part of it. My mind had been using my willingness to wed Tommit as the only way to save Evver and Cassius. *What if there was another way? Could there be a way to bring him down and destroy the monster forever?* I wasn't sure. I needed to find a way but it was growing harder and harder to distinguish those around me from those I could trust. There seemed to be plenty of wolves in sheep's clothing surrounding me.

Maybe I would have to play along with the wolves. . . .

*

I got up and washed my face.

There was going to be a new Aurora when I walked out of this room. I may look the same on the outside but something in me had changed. *I was tired of running from bullies.* That was all Tommit, Drayben and Lote were. They were just big bullies who were used to getting their own way. If enough of us fought back then it might work but who could I entrust with my thoughts? My stomach growled in

protest. I had eaten too much when I had gone to dinner with Tommit. I should have a belly ache but for some reason eating so much at dinner had increased my appetite. Perhaps it was my nap that had ignited my hunger.

I straightened my dress and used my fingers to smooth my hair. I was certain I looked a fright, but now I didn't care much. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door. I was shocked there was no one standing guard.

This was strange. First Evver was gone and she never left my side these days. Now there was no guard. I was grateful but I wasn't going to go looking for my missing guard. There were lanterns lit down the hallways lighting my way toward the small kitchen.

The castle was so silent it was eerie.

I found myself checking behind my shoulder for danger. My nerves were tingling. My steps were quick and quiet. I could see the opening of the kitchen and there was a warm light coming out welcoming me in. It was a relief to find my way to somewhere familiar. I stepped around the doorway. My heart stopped.

Sitting at the table were, Evver, Lote, and— Cassius.

Lote and Cassius were seated at the far end of the table. Evver was at the other end of the table and looking afraid. Cassius looked at ease. I was certain Evver hadn't had a chance to share her shocking

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news with Cassius yet. He looked so at ease. I prayed he hadn't said anything incriminating linking him and Evver.

"Aurora_" Evver shouted jumping out of her chair. Suddenly all eyes were on me. I felt like I was interrupting.

"Hi. Sorry to interrupt. I was hungry." I started looking around the room for something to eat. I willed my hands to become busy, so that I wouldn't use them to reach out to Evver or Cassius. My eyes searched around the room and I looked in every direction except the table.

Evver was to me in a quick moment.

"Here, let me get you something." Her hands were shaking and I looked into her eyes praying she would calm herself.

"So Cassius you were telling me why you were here." Lote's voice rang in my ears.

"I was just telling the girl here, I can't recall her name, I am going to need a lunch packed for Miss Aurora tomorrow. Her riding lessons start in the morning. I promised King Tommit I would have her riding like a professional by week's end. I would hate, to let the King down. So I thought I would save time and have lunch ready to go with us in the morning." Relief flooded me.

"What is an excellent idea_ It would be great if everyone thought ahead like you. Now, I will be going so you may arrange it. Good night Aurora, Evver and Cassius." She stood up and her wings made

the smallest of movements as if they were fighting to take off. My stomach tightened thinking about it. I knew our charade would have to continue. I worried she would pop back in to check in on us.

When we were sure she had made her way far from the safety of the warm kitchen, we spoke.

“Evver, let’s go. I don’t want Lote returning and finding us still huddled together.” I turned to take a single glance at Cassius. I wouldn’t allow myself anything more. When I looked in his direction, my stomach dropped. He was looking at me and he looked so hurt. I hated putting any of the pain I saw in his eyes. It was for the best. I couldn’t have him linked to me or Evver more than he was already going to be. He recovered quickly.

“I will see you tomorrow morning Miss Aurora.” His tone was cold and sent ice cooling my blood. My heart was caught in my chest.

“Good night.” Were the only words I trusted myself to say out loud. My gaze lingered on him for a moment longer and then I grabbed Evver’s arm and dragged her out of the room. I didn’t give her a chance to say goodbye or to worry about my growling stomach. Without a word, I continued to drag her through the hallways of the castle. Making a beeline for my bedroom I was focused on getting her too somewhere safe. Right now it was the safest spot I knew. I could see someone coming, I could hear someone at my door and I could see the entire kingdom from my window.

I knew Evver had to be wondering what was going on.

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She was still shaken up from our encounter with Lote. So was I. Cassius had played it cool but I wondered if Lote was still suspicious. It terrified me to knowing she could fly. It just showed me that she was not what she appeared.

Lote looked like a kind and caring mother figure.

She went out of her way to help everyone in the castle putting herself in the middle of everyone and their problems. Now I knew it was just her way of keeping tabs on all of us. Because of her I was being forced to marry the despicable Tommit. I would bet my life that she was the very reason Drayben knew so much about my affinity for Evver; it was simply because of Lote. I couldn't risk her having any idea Cassius was anything other than a stable boy.

We rushed inside my room and shut the door.

We were both gasping for breath. It took us a few minutes to relieve our lungs of the pressure of from our run thru the halls. I walked over and sat down on the large window seat. Looking out the window I could see they had lit the torches for the night while I was away. It really was a beautiful sight. Evver sat across from me. We sat in silence for almost twenty minutes before she spoke.

"I'm sorry." Her words brought my head up with a snap.

"Sorry? Why? What happened?" My mind was already playing a wicked game of torture with images which would end the lives of those I loved. My muscles tightened I worried they would burst.

“For leaving you if I would have just stayed here then Lote wouldn’t have found me and Cas.”

She looked incredibly guilty and I could see it weighed on her heavily.

“What happened before I got there?” I was terrified of the answer.

*

“Cassius had just arrived. He was there to make arrangements for tomorrow. I couldn’t believe it when he told me. I wanted to laugh when he told me that Tommit insisted on Cassius spending time with you. If he only knew . . .”

“What about Lote?”

“Well, Cassius had just finished telling me about the riding lessons when Lote showed up. You should have seen her. She put on her sugary act and wanted to know all about Cassius. I prayed he would know better, see through her act when I couldn’t. Just then, you showed up. It was an answer to my prayer. One look at you and Cassius could tell something was up with her. I am just so glad he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut.” She smiled. I was certain she was thinking about how she had just pulled one over on Lote.

*

It relaxed me for a minute to see her smiling like that. It was so rare these days to see her experience even a moment of joy.

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I wished I could give her a million moments like this.

Chapter 19

Tiden stoked the fire.

It was going to be another cold night. Thankfully tonight they would finally be sleeping next to a roaring fire. They managed to make it out of the troll forest, otherwise called the Breko forest, a couple of hours ago. Traveling at night had been their risky plan to avoid the Destroyers and Cronan's thugs. Passing the border into Fara was a relief. Tiden decided they should get a few hours of sleep before trying to head into the capital. Tiden wasn't worried about the welcome he and Trix would be getting from King Calas.

After Tommit what more could he do to them?

Trix was fast asleep.

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She had flown most of the way. Tiden offered to carry her but she refused.

Trix was a strong fairy and she wanted to prove her strength to the larger than life Giant. He was concerned about her. She was running on fury. Tiden didn't know her story but he could see the effects of her past. Tiden's story was known by most. There were looks of pity and sadness whenever he joined a group of others. He was a warning to those in hiding to stay hidden and vigilant at every moment.

He looked down at Trix.

The fire was caused rainbows to dance on her skin. It made him smile. Very few things made Tiden smile these days. He loved the way she was ready to charge into battle. There was no concern for her own well being. Tiden was an only child. It was hard for him to get close to anyone after his parents had been killed. When tiny Trix had volunteered for the dangerous mission he couldn't let her go all alone. He had already grown a great fondness for the miniature girl. She had a snarky attitude and instead of upsetting him it only made him laugh.

Trix would try to act annoyed, but then she would end up laughing as well.

Neither of them had any family left.

It was something which bonded them before they even spoke. It was painful for each of them to speak of their past so they agreed to focus on the future. Tiden wanted to sleep but he also didn't want to leave Trix unguarded. She may be older than him but he still felt like he was responsible for her. Watching

her sleep he couldn't help but wonder what would happen if they failed. So much of Paradan had already been destroyed by King Tommit's hand. If they botched this then there would be nothing left if Tommit had his way.

His eyes grew heavy and as much as he fought the weariness that was quickly overtaking him he was soon fast asleep.

*

Trix had been awake about an hour.

Tiden was still sleeping and she decided to let him sleep a little longer. She walked around and found some Raiy berries at a nearby brook. She gathered the berries for a small breakfast and then she refilled their canteens. It was easier for her to get by with a little food but Tiden needed hundreds of pounds of food a day to keep up his full strength. He had been getting by with less than ten pounds of food a day. They were carrying some and foraging for the rest. Trix watched him sleep. He reminded her of her baby brother but much larger. Erax was only a year old when the Destroyers found their family's hiding spot. Trix was out gathering food her father had been wounded and was healing at home. Her mother was taking care of him and Erax. They had no clue what was happening when the walls of their home were being torn down.

Destroyers had used their grappling hooks and brute strength to pull the walls of the wooden hut to the ground. When Trix returned less than an hour later there was no sign of her family and her home

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was left in shambles. With a broken heart she went into hiding deep, deep into the Echo forest. She had lived a life in exile for the past two years. During this time there had been almost no contact with anyone. Trix had grown hard steel walls around her once tender heart. Spending this forced time with Tiden was the first time she had been around anyone since her family had disappeared she could feel those walls rumbling. It was scarier to her than facing King Calas and his entire army on her own.

Tiden woke with a start.

"Trix?" His eyes fought to focus on the tiny fairy.

She flew over and landed in front of him. "Right here, big guy." He sighed in relief. Tiden pulled himself up into a seated position. For someone so large he was surprisingly graceful.

"I found some breakfast. Nothing big. . . . It's no flostrich egg omelet." She placed the berries in front of him. They were wrapped in a large palm leaf. Next to it she placed his filled cold canteen.

*

Tiden looked down eyeing her, sheepishly. He had wanted to protect her and here she was taking care of him, while he slept. For the first time since they left the meeting with Cassius, he felt his age.

"Thanks Trix." He started to eat and then realized she wasn't following suit. "Aren't you going to eat?"

*

"I already did while you were sleeping." It was only a small fib. She had drunk deeply from the cool brook but didn't want to take food from him. The berries were just starting to ripen. In a few weeks there will be an abundance of berries. Enough to keep Tiden full for weeks, but they weren't going to be here for weeks. It was time they didn't have and every second they wasted was time Paradan would never get back.

"Are you sure?" he asked his voice childlike and quiet.

Trix knew he was hungry. She could see it echoing in his brilliant blue eyes. It hurt her to know she couldn't do more to take that look out of his eyes. Trix hoped the risks we were all taking would forever do away with the hunger residing in his baby blue eyes. He ate quickly and ravenously.

Trix could tell he was still hungry when he was finished. Tiden had learned the hard way when it came to water so he only drank half of his container leaving more for later. There was no telling what they were going to find when they entered the capital of Fara. *Would there be friends willing to help them? Or would they be in worse trouble than before?*

*

In less than two hours they had made it over the Arit Mountain.

It was the last hurdle before coming down into the valley of the capital of Fara. It was apparent no one had taken this trail in some time. The vines had overgrown blocking the path up. Thankfully, Tiden's large feet made easy work of the thorn infested trail. Trix was tired but still insisted on flying most

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of the way. Only after Tiden offered for the fourth time to carry her and she declined did she catch a glimpse of pain in his eyes. She quickly decided she was too tired. His step quickened and his smile grew.

*

Tiden didn't want to admit to Trix he was scared. They were clueless as to what awaited them at the end of the serpentine road. *Would it be friend or foe?*

Stepping off the trail, they were surprised at how similar Fara was to Paradan.

It looked as if they had been built by the same hands.

Cobblestone roads connected the busy shops. Trix expected stares and gasps of shock when then marched through the town square. The opposite happened. It was as if they belonged there. Fairies flew from one shop to the next. Giants of all ages walked the roads some hand in hand. Humans and trolls laughed together encircled in conversation. There were even some dwarves playing some sort of dice game with a group of humans. It brought a lump to both of their throats. It was Paradan before Tommit had taken over. Trix's eyes watered as she tried to fight back the spilling of the salty tears. This was unlike anything they could have imagined.

Trix and Tiden looked at each other.

So many thoughts and emotions passed thru them in a single glance. Tiden walked toward another giant. He looked like he could have been Tiden's brother. Only, he was twice Tiden's size. It was scary approaching him. *Would he reject them?*

"Hi." Tiden's voice was quiet and fought to stay strong.

"Good morning," was followed by an open smile. Tiden wasn't expecting such a warm reply. He was frozen. Trix looked over at him and could see that she needed to take control of things.

*

"My name is Trix and this is my friend Tiden." It felt good calling someone her friend. "Could you point us to where we would find King Calas?" The other giant's eyes shaded with confusion for a moment.

"King Calas? Why do you ask?" Concern took over his features and the friendly smile was waning.

"We are from Paradan." The Giant's eyes widened. "We have come because we need help." The Giant looked at them and then relaxed. Trix was happy he could see they weren't a threat.

"I'm Galen pleased to meet you." His larger than life smile, returned. "What can I do to help?"

Chapter 20

Waking up this morning, I was excited.

Today, I got to spend all day with Cassius. The best part was that I didn't have to sneak around in darkened shadows to do it. I knew I couldn't show my emotions on the outside, as there was always a chance someone could be watching us. Evver helped me dress. I was in a dark brown dress today. It would hide the dirt. I was certain I would spend more time on the ground than in the saddle. Thinking of climbing on a large animal had me scared, but if there was anyone I could trust with my safety— *it would be Cassius.*

My hair was braided in double braids; for the first time, my hair was far from my face.

I looked at my reflection and I realized I was glowing. Evver noticed too, but she was kind enough not to tease me about it. I know she still was hopeful Cassius would come thru at the last moment and save the day. Secretly I wished for the same but I would have never voiced it out loud.

“Better hurry. We don’t want to keep Cassius waiting.” Her smile had a hint of glee to it. Evver was probably happier about us spending time together than either of us. She took my hand and started pulling me toward the door. “Wait_” She stopped dead in her tracks. She ran into my closet. Pulling out the emerald green cape she had made for me. “It’s going to be cold later.”

“Thank you Evver.” I leaned down and kissed her cheek. She blushed.

“Alright, let’s get moving.” I followed her willingly.

We made our way down the winding corridors. I felt like a small child rushing downstairs on Christmas morning. Our only stop was in the kitchen to pick up our packed lunch, and for me to have a large slice of fresh baked bread. It did little to settle my nervous stomach, but I knew from experience I would regret not eating if I waited to eat until lunch. Normally Evver would have made sure I had eaten more, but she was anxious to get me to Cassius.

Heading down the never-ending labyrinth of hallways, I had started to become familiar with. I could see we were nearing a hallway I had never entered. Evver knew exactly where we were heading and I trusted her. She opened the door at the end of the hallway. My eyes were blinded by the light.

We stepped out into a large meadow.

Not far from the exit there was a walkway leading up a small hill. At the top of the hill was a large barn. It was enormous. We must be on the other side of the castle because I was certain I would have

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noticed this before. Heading down the hill was the most beautiful sight. *Cassius*. He looked amazing in his riding gear.

His smile was contagious and I couldn't help but match it. My heart flew when I saw the approval in his brilliant eyes. The way he looked at me made me blush. Walking toward him, I focused on the floor. Not trusting myself to look in his eyes. Evver squeezed my hand and pulled me along. I followed matching her steps with mine. She stopped suddenly, surprising me. I looked up. *Cassius*, was only a couple of feet away from us. He must have run down the hill.

"Good morning." His eyes stayed with me.

"Morning."

"*Cassius* I packed all of your favorites. Don't worry, *Aurora* I packed some for you too." She smiled at me, but the wide grin was saved for her brother. I couldn't help but feel like there were eyes on us.

"Well shouldn't we get started? I'm going to need all the help I can get." I said groaning. I had never been very graceful and putting me on a large horse in a ball gown was just asking for an embarrassing accident to happen. I turned and hugged Evver. "Wish me luck. I know I'm going to need it."

“Don’t worry, Aurora. Cassius can teach anyone to ride. He’s the best.” Her eyes were glowing with pride.

“I will see you later tonight. Try not to get into any trouble while I’m away today.” My words had Cassius laughing loudly. It echoed in the open space.

“You’re joking. . . right? Evver and trouble are best friends.” She glowered at him and playfully swat at his arm. Then putting her hands on her hips, she turned and marched off in the opposite direction.

“Come on Ev, I was only kidding.” Not looking back, she made her way into the castle and slammed the door shut behind her.

“Do you think she’s really mad?” I asked worried I had offended my friend. Cassius, was laughing again. It sounded like the most beautiful melody to me. If it was the only sound I could hear for the rest of my life, then I would be happy.

“No. I think if anything, she is upset about not tagging along with us today. Don’t worry. By the time you will return tonight, it will be like it never happened.” His eyes were smiling and I believed it. How could anyone stay upset with him? “Good I am glad you brought your cape. It’s going to cool off this afternoon.” I looked at the sky it was clear and bright. I wondered how they determined the weather forecast without satellites.

“I hope you’re ready. I wasn’t joking earlier.”

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Cassius could sense my fear. He reached his hand out to touch my arm for a split second.

Electricity shot straight to my heart. I pulled back from his touch. I saw a touch of pain reach his eyes and then it was quickly replaced with the smile I always loved.

“Come along then, it sounds like I have my work cut out for me.”

I followed him up the path toward the expanse of the colossal barn. It looked like it could have held at least ten large homes that currently resided on my neighborhood street, inside of it. One thing saddened me, I could see Tommit took better care of his animals, than he did his own people. I was grateful his animals had Cassius to take care of them, but where was the same level of care and compassion for the people he was meant to care for?

I included all of the mythical creatures in my definition of people.

From what I had observed, most of them had more humanity in them than most people would ever experience. We passed beautiful mares in every size and shade of color. I kept waiting for him to say this is the one, but no, he continued walking. Cassius led me to the end stall. The door to the last stall was shut.

“I want you to meet someone.” He said with a glint in his eye.

There were iron locks on the door. At least five of them blocked access to anyone who dared try to enter. Cassius pulled out a ring of keys. In a quick motion he had all of the locks undone and was

opening the door. Whatever needed so many locks to hold it in had me nervous. I gripped onto Cassius' arm without realizing it. He turned back and smiled at me. Leading me further into the sinister doorway, my fingers dug deeper into his skin.

"Don't worry, Aurora."

His calm words did little to assuage my nerves, when I saw a second massive rough hewn wooden door. It appeared much thicker than the first. A massive plank of wood kept the door closed off to prying eyes. There was no way Cassius was going to be able to lift the plank up for us to enter into the mysterious room. I was certain most of the giants I had come to know would be able to pry it from its grasp.

This was just another time I was learning not to discount what Cassius could accomplish. His strong hands gripped the plank tightly and with what seemed like little effort the plank was resting in his capable hands. Setting it down gently next to the side wall of the door frame with ease he turned back and smiled his wonderful crooked smile.

"Ready?"

My eyes grew wide and my heart seemed to stutter to a stop. I bit hard on my lower lip to keep it from trembling. Fear of the unknown was taunting me. Cassius seemed annoyed. He turned so we were facing each other. He was standing only inches from my face. I could feel his breath on my lips. His brow

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was furrowed in the fiercest way possible. Both of his hands reached up and cupped one of my arms. I could almost feel his pulse on my skin.

“Aurora. Do you not know me by now? Do you really believe for a moment I would lead you into danger? How could you?”

Before I could respond, he pulled me to him. It was our second kiss and it was just as powerful as our first. This time there was an underlying anger behind his lips. I could feel it in his arms as they pulled me to him. My body and mind were fighting. My body was responding to his touch and my mind kept telling me to *STOP*_ It flashed images of Drayben threatening me, threatening Evver and threatening Cassius. The thought and his lips produced a groan from my mouth.

I pushed him away.

“Stop_ ***This can't happen***_” I tried to untangle myself from his sturdy arms. He fought me.

There was no way he was giving up so easily this time. Cassius pulled me back into another kiss. This time, he wasn't going to let me give up. His arm wrapped me even closer than before. I felt his left hand, move up to my head. His lips did things to me I never thought possible. For a moment I forgot about Tommit, my wedding, everyone and everything.

The only thing that existed in this moment was Cassius and I.

I felt the relief in his body when I gave in and surrendered myself to him.

*

It was silent.

All I could hear was my breath and the beat of my heartbeat next to Cassius'. His was racing. I could feel it pumping through his shirt. My heart had soared when I gave in and finally let myself feel the power of his feelings but I also knew it would hit a brick wall when I stepped back into reality. For the moment, I wanted to savor it. Cassius broke the silence.

"So, are you ready to meet my friend now?" I looked up into his eyes. They were shining in the low light and it made it hard to say anything but yes.

"Sure."

"You're going to enjoy this I promise." Still holding on to my hand he pushed open the door with his free hand and led the way. We entered a large area. It was empty with the exception of some hay on the floor. In the corner of the room was something that took my breath away.

It was something I only had seen in books or badly portrayed in the movies.

A unicorn_

It was more than a unicorn. It had wings, a *Pegasus*? It was snow white and the most exquisite creature I had ever laid eyes on— which said a lot because I had seen fairies, and *Cassius*. Cassius pulled me forward toward the striking animal.

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It moved toward us at the same pace.

“Good morning boy. I have someone who I would like you to meet. This is . . . *Aurora*.” The Pegasus responded by looking at me and then to Cassius then raised its head and neighed. Cassius laughed. “Yes, it’s really her. I told you she was beautiful.” I felt the familiar heat flood my face. It occurred to me that Cassius had been talking about me to his “friend”. He turned to me and motioned forward toward the Pegasus.

“Aurora, I want you to meet Darant. Darant, meet the lovely Aurora.”

As I tried to think of something appropriate to say to this majestic animal before me, beat me to the punch.

“Nice to finally meet you.” My mouth dropped in shock.

He could talk? I turned to Cassius who had a mischievous grin on his face. One look at my face and he broke into laughter.

“Yes he talks— but normally only to me.” I turned back to Darant realizing I was being rude.

“I’m sorry. It was just such a shock to hear you speak. It’s nice to meet you, too.” I tried to smile but my mouth wasn’t cooperating.

"Don't worry. You should have seen the look on Cassius' face the first time I spoke to him. He was certain he was losing his mind. I laughed all day." Cassius' laughter stopped. I guess he didn't like it when the laughter was at his expense.

"I didn't bring her here for you to mock me." His tone was harsh, but his eyes couldn't betray the warmth that he felt for his friend.

"Sorry. It's just nice to speak to someone else for a change. I can see why you're always talking about her, Aurora if I may you are beautiful."

"Th. . . .thank you." It came out in an embarrassing stutter.

"She has a terrible time accepting compliments. Someday she will get used to it." I glowered at him but his dazzling eyes made it hard to hold my hard glare.

"Actually, I brought her here today hoping you would help me teach her how to ride. What do you think?" I turned and looked at Darant. I was certain he would run in the opposite direction.

"It would be my honor."

"Are you sure? It could end badly." I said grimacing thinking of me trying to be elegant in my oversized gown.

"Badly? Why would you say that?" I looked from Darant to Cassius and prepared to embarrass myself further.

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"I am not the most graceful person and now I have this huge gown on and it feels impossible."

Now not only was Cassius laughing but Darant had joined in. I felt my face burning with humiliation. My gaze found its way to the floor. I wished the ground would open up and swallow me whole. In my life I had never been the one that people had picked first for the team. Even though I had been athletic most of my life for some reason I couldn't gain the confidence I needed to make my body work.

"Don't fret Aurora. I promise by the time we are done today you will be riding like you have done so since before you could walk." I looked at Cassius skeptically. But I was learning that I had to put my trust in someone. *Why couldn't it be in the boy I believed I loved?*

"I promise to go easy." If it was even possible, it looked like Darant was smiling at me. It was almost creepy.

"Alright."

Cassius reached out his hand to me and pulled me toward the waiting Pegasus.

I tried to control my trembling by reminding myself that Cassius would never put me in danger. Darant kneeled down making it easier for me to climb on him. It felt like, I was sitting on a saddle, only there was no saddle. *It was the strangest feeling.*

There was no way that I wasn't going to fall. I was going to be the running joke of Paradan. Biting my bottom lip I could feel the familiar burn returning to my eyes. I hated feeling so weak.

"Now, I am going to stand up. You may hold on to my mane to steady yourself." My breath again was caught in my chest. I didn't want to hurt him, but I didn't want to fall either. So, I reached out and gripped his mane with all of my might. He stood in one fluid motion and I didn't feel a thing. I couldn't believe it. My body was still in the same position it had been when he was on the ground.

"Aurora I am going to take a few steps now. Are you ready?" I looked to Cassius and he motioned encouragingly.

"Ok." Holding my breath I was waiting for the steps to come. It was the strangest feeling. I could see us moving toward the door but it was as if we stood still and the door moved to us. There wasn't the fear I expected. I suppressed a giggle.

"By the look in your eyes it wasn't so bad. Now was it?" Cassius asked with a grin.

"No. It felt like we weren't even moving."

"Thank you Aurora your kind words are quite a compliment." Darant threw back his head so he could rub his mane against my hand. His locks were incredibly soft and I found myself running my fingers through his mane over and over. Curiosity got the better of my judgment and I reached over to rub his horn. *"Oh that tickles,"* his body shuddered with the chills that racked his body from my unexpected touch.

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"Sorry." Cassius was doubled over laughing. I hated to be laughed at and my bottom lip jutted out in a large pout.

"I'm not laughing at you. It's just Darant's face. Not to mention that I am guilty of doing the same thing the first time I got close enough to try." I didn't feel so bad after his confession.

"Don't worry Aurora."

"I promise not to do it again," I felt guilty for already upsetting my new friend.

"Just warn me next time."

"Deal."

*

"I hate to have to leave, but Aurora and I have somewhere we need to be. I promise I will bring her back to visit again." Darant and I both looked at Cassius; we had both been enjoying the company that neither of us even thought about the rest of the day's activities.

"We have to go?" I asked sadly.

"Yes, but I promise we will return in the morning." I turned back to Darant.

"I enjoyed our time together. Thank you for helping me today."

"My pleasure, I will look forward to tomorrow. Perhaps you could bring me a bunch of apples? Cassius has been stingy as of late." The Pegasus half heartedly growled at the beautiful boy beside me.

"Now, Darant I told you I would try didn't I? It's not my fault buddy."

"Why can't he have apples?" I asked feeling like I would climb a tree if I had to just to bring my new friend the apples he craved. Cassius looked at me as if I should have already known the answer to my question.

Once again, I stood there bewildered.

"It's not that he can't have apples. I used to bring them to him all the time. It's just" He trailed off. "See Aurora, since King Tommit has taken over, less and less of the food supply is getting to the people in the kingdom. It's strange because if anything our crops have increased. I'm not really sure where all of the food is going. There is just not enough to go around. It's been months since I was able to bring anything but Oats to Darant."

"Ah don't worry about it Cassius. I know it's not you."

I don't know what troubled me more, the fact food was going missing or the fact Tommit always had an over-abundance. I would have to figure it out and *soon*. The last thing I wanted was for the people and animals of Paradan going hungry.

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"I promise I will get you some apples." I leaned over and hugged my new friend. It seemed strange to be hugging an animal who seemed more human than most of the human's that I had met during my time here.

"Have fun." Cassius waved at his friend and started opening the doors. Locking the locks took longer than unlocking had. While he did I took advantage and looked around. I could feel eyes on me and I didn't like that feeling. I worried Lote or Drayben had someone following along making sure I played nicely. There was a real resolve to keep a safe distance from myself and the warmth of Cassius' touch. Yet, there was a growing feeling in the pit of my stomach that longed to feel his lips again.

Cassius led the way.

I forced my hands to stay at my side. They were both clenched in steel tight fists. I fought the need to reach out and take his hand. We made our way out of the barn and headed down a new path. It led to the forested area. I bit my lip to stop myself from asking where we were heading. The bushes formed an archway that we had to duck under to miss taking a bunch of thorns to our faces. We walked and walked; my feet were starting to swell. It felt like we had been walking for hours I wondered how far this path went. As the walkway narrowed I was concerned with my large dress making it thru the small opening. Just as I was about to reach out for Cassius to stop him the area opened. We were welcomed by a large meadow.

It was breathtaking.

For a minute it was as if the revolving of the earth had slowed down. I was able to take in every inch of the stunning space. The grass was rich and green as if it had just had a fresh rain shower, there were wildflowers scattered throughout the meadow. A large tree was centered in the middle of the field. The gargantuan oak would have taken at least thirty people going hand in hand to reach around the trunk. Never had I imagined there could be a tree this immense. The roots were starting to grow out of the ground and they were in a tangled mess. Gnarled bark dressed the old Oak.

It had dozens of branches jutting out of the top bending and twisting in every imaginable direction.

Hanging on each branch were different shades of ribbon. The effect it had on the leaves was an astonishing rainbow. Some of the ribbons were glittery and shimmered in the light of the sun. Walking toward it I was touched by the feeling the ground held. I wanted to turn and catch a glimpse of Cassius but I couldn't pull my eyes from the incredible sight. Feeling his eyes on me I reluctantly turned in his direction.

"It's beautiful." His eyes never left mine.

"Yes it is." I bushed knowing he was talking about me.

"What is it?" I turned back to focus on the tree. It was much safer than looking into his frosty blue eyes they never left me feeling anything other than fevered.

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“We are in the center of the Echo forest, also known as the fairy forest. This is the wishing tree. When a couple starts their life together they come tie a ribbon to a branch and leave a wish. It is said that this tree has the power to bind their love for all eternity.” I looked at the thousands of ribbons that each represented a couple promising their eternal love to one another. Tears started to glisten on my cheeks. My heart swelled and ached at the same time. It was just another reminder of how I was going to live my life without eternal love. It pained me but I couldn’t bear to tear my focus from it.

I felt strong arms winding their way around my waist.

“One of ours could be hanging there someday.” His warm breath tickled my ear.

A million feelings passed through me with his touch and his warming words. *I could see it.* In my vision I saw us standing before the wishing tree surrounded by our friends and family. *I longed for that moment.* As much as I needed air on a daily basis I needed to believe what I was seeing was possible. Looking around the circle my eyes lingered on Evver. Seeing her snapped me out of my reverie. I pushed at his tensing arms. He protested.

“*No_*” I pushed harder this time he caved to my objection. Releasing me I turned out of his embrace and faced him. His eyes were no longer dry and I could see his pain.

“Cassius, this can never happen. Can’t you see that it’s impossible?” I was so frustrated with the entire situation. “I’m going to marry Tommit. Then Evver will be safe, you will be safe . . .” My words

were cut off by a sob escaping my throat. He took steps toward me but I stopped him by pushing my hands out at him.

The closer I became to him the more my fate hurt.

“Why do you think marrying that *monster* will keep us safe?”

I realized my mistake. The secret I had been carrying around had been released and to the one person I knew wouldn't let my slip go unchallenged.

“Never mind.” I tried to turn away from him. His eyes would pry the information out of me quicker than I was prepared to divulge it. Cassius raced up and turned me around.

“Aurora, *tell* me.” His voice was forceful and full of fire. Icy blue eyes were burning I wondered how they withstood the flames. Fear continued to run cold thru my blue blood. I knew I would gladly face death, if I ever caused the events, which lead to the end this phenomenon of a man who stood before me.

“Since I arrived in Paradan so much of it has made zero sense to me. There are only two things here that have made me believe any of this is real, Evver and you. Both of you are the only things that make the rest of this madness manageable. My world is so different from here. There is so much I could live without, but losing *you* and *Evver* to a decision I made is nothing I could survive.” I bit my lip from revealing any more.

“Please don't push. Can't we just enjoy the time we have together this week?”

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He looked from me to the ribbons dancing in the wishing tree.

Then he turned back to me his eyes were burning with desire I felt like I would spontaneously combust just from the way his eyes gazed upon me.

“Eternity is the only amount of time I will accept.”

Chapter 21

Trix and Tiden were led toward the center of the city.

Galen was listening to their story as they passed questioning eyes. Galen was seventeen years old.

He was considered an adult in the giant world. All giant's had a tendency to be compassionate to those around them. They could also be fiercely violent if they were pushed. His eyes clouded over, hearing what had befallen his young friends.

Galen couldn't believe that kind of brutality existed so close to Fara. Hearing about how Tiden had lost his parents had pained him deeply. His resolve to help the travelers deepened. He knew the King would know what to do.

They passed many with curious looks— it was expected. Most everyone in the kingdom knew each other and to see two outsiders was incredibly rare. Each raised eyebrow, each widened eye asked the same question. "What's going on? Are you ok?"

Galen's smile was all he needed to assuage those fears. Relief flashed in the onlookers eyes when they saw his sincere smile.

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When they arrived at the castle Tiden and Trix looked at each other in surprise. Fara's castle was nearly identical to Paradan's. This unnerved them. *Would the king be the same tyrant that held their throne?* With great trepidation they followed the looming Giant. Galen seemed to be truthfully willing and able to help them. Concern filled his features as they told him the story of life with King Tommit in charge. *But was it an act?* They were unsure but willing to take the risk.

*

Kerit informed the King there were visitors wishing to have an audience with him. Galen was with them so he agreed. Tiden with Trix perched on his shoulder followed behind their new friend. He stood protectively in front of both of them.

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"Your highness," he bowed deeply.

"Galen, it is good to see you." The loud voice slipped past Galen's huge form. "I hear you have some visitors who seek my audience."

"Yes, your majesty. I would like you to meet Tiden and Trix both from Paradan." At the mention of Paradan there were several gasps in the room. Tiden wasn't sure where it originated. Galen stepped to the side, allowing them to have their first glance at the king.

He was much younger than they expected. The king seemed to be in his late twenties. He had dark walnut hair and striking blue eyes. There was something familiar about him. Tiden was relieved to see the kindness in his eyes and concern when he looked at them. There was none of the rage, no fury they had been expecting.

"Thank you, your majesty. King Calas, we have come because we are in need of assistance from you and your country." Tiden words caused uplifted eyes and looks of surprise.

"My young friend, I am willing to hear your story but I am King Calan. My father King Calas passed away just short of a rime ago." Tiden's eyes widened. This explained the youth of the king. "I can assure you I do not share my father's paranoia when it comes to your land. I believe it is far better to have our lands be allies instead of enemies." Tiden wondered how he would feel after he learned about King

Tommit. He was certain the possibility of war would weigh heavy on his mind. There was a fine line they were going to have to walk.

“King Calan, my friend Trix and I have come in search of help for our kingdom.” Tiden paused, wondering how much information he should share.

“What assistance does Paradan need? Has King Windom sent you?” Now it was their turn to look confused.

“Sire, King Windom has been dead about four kelmes now. His replacement is what has brought us here. King Tommit appeared and promised peace. There has been nothing close to peace since King Tommit seized the throne. All of the giants over the age of nine have been killed. Anyone who has stood against him has either been killed or enslaved. We are *desperate*.” A look of terror had swept over King Calan’s face. Any noise in the room had quieted. Galen was in tears. His enormous tear drops were quickly building a puddle in the middle of the room.

“I find it hard to imagine the barbarity a person would have to have within them to treat the people he was entrusted with like this. My heart is truly saddened. But why do you come here now? Why did you not come earlier? I know my father was harsh but I also know he would have done all in his power to help.” King Calan was wringing his hands in frustration and fury.

“We are entering a far more scary possibility. King Tommit has been searching for Ecraciaia’s wishing well. If he finds it then we are in all danger. He is scheduled to wed in less than two weeks. There

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has been word that he has found one of the Para's already and this was before we left. I can only imagine what has happened since we started our journey here."

*

King Calan was standing up and pacing now. It was one thing to hear about the atrocities his neighboring kingdom was suffering, but realizing that King Tommit was searching for the wishing well. If the well was found, then his kingdom was in danger, too. *The thought terrified him.* He wished that his father was still here. He would have known what to do.

"Tiden, I promise that I will do all in my power to help Paradan. You have to understand, your news of Tommit's search affects my kingdom as well. I must call a meeting with my council. I hope you would join us." He turned to a troll that stood less than ten feet from them.

"Raket, I want you to sound the horn. I want others gathered here before the sun rises." The large troll nodded and turned and ran toward the door. "Galen if you can gain control of your emotions please. I am sure our guests are hungry and tired from their journey here. Why don't you take them to the kitchen and then find them a room. If there is anything else they need, please fulfill their needs and then bring them to my office in the morning."

*

Tiden was touched by the generosity of King Calan. It was the right decision coming here for help. Cassius would be thrilled when they returned with the Fara army in tow.

“Of course, sire.” Galen reached out and motioned for them to follow him. Tiden froze in his tracks.

“Thank you.” His words were fervent and full of gratitude.

They followed him to the kitchen and were surprised at the bounty of food. Tiden ate until he was stuffed. He bellowed in pain from his stomach being stretched beyond its capacity.

*

It thrilled Trix to watch him gorge on food.

It had been such a worry to her, seeing him going to bed hungry at night. Listening to him whimper during his sleep, had been more pain than she thought manageable. She had come to love him like a brother.

Trix was so proud watching him speak to King Calan.

Part of her wanted to speak out and have her voice heard but she also wanted to allow him his voice. Tiden was growing into his skin every day. She ate some berries and some vegetables. It was surprising to see just how much her stomach had shrunk, in the past few days.

Tiden was alive and talking to everyone in the room. He had found his stride and she was thrilled to see it. Trix was so caught up in watching Tiden that she didn't notice a young fairy watching her.

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“Do you want one?”

Trix looked down and saw a young fairy child. He looked up at her with large caramel colored eyes. His skin was the color of rich hot chocolate. A halo of ebony curls encircled his tiny head. In his hand he held what looked like a purple peach. Trix had never seen anything like it. She reached out to take the foreign fruit.

“Thank you,” he waited for her to take a bite.

She took a tentative bite unsure as to what flavor to expect. It was delicious, sweet, juicy, soft and tangy at the same time. Trix had never eaten anything like it. She smiled and a quiet giggle escaped her lips. “I love it. What’s your name?” he smiled shyly.

“Lilet.”

“My name is Trix,” she smiled warmly at the timid boy. He reminded her of what her little brother would have been if he would have lived. She guessed that he was near the age of five or six.

“Hi. Can I take you to your room?” his voice was quiet and Trix had to strain to hear him.

“Yes, please.” Lilet reached his hand and offered it to Trix. Looking toward Tiden she could see he was in the middle of arm wrestling another giant. His laughter shook the table. She was certain he would be alright for a few minutes on his own. Lilet guided her through the maze of hallways. It wasn’t long

before his gossamer wings fluttered to a complete stop. Trix followed him and set down behind him.

He reached from around his neck and pulled out a purple ribbon with a silver key at the end.

Opening the door, he stepped aside and then motioned for her to enter.

Trix's wings fluttered taking off and sending her into the unknown room.

The room was unlike anything she had ever seen. Trix was sure Lilet had brought her to the wrong room. *There was no way that this room was meant for her.* Luxury was the first thing she thought when she entered the room. Shimmering silver drapes framed the huge picture window. The bed had an upholstered headboard. It stepped up slowly until it made a peak at the center and then mirrored it on the way down. The way it had been cut out, made it appear to be a crown welcoming you to the bed. It was upholstered in rich gray velvet. Trix longed to reach out and touch it. Next was the plush comforter; it was made of silk and embroidered from top to bottom. It was framed with the same gray velvet. Piles of pillows in different shades of silver and purples were piled to the top of the headboard.

Delicately carved wooden furniture, all around the room, were stained a dark ebony color. A quiet voice broke Trix's gaze.

"Do you like it?" Turning back to Lilet I could see the anticipation dancing in his eyes.

"It's amazing. But I'm sure this is meant for someone else." She waved her hands around the luxury before her.

"Someone else? I don't understand." His tiny brow furrowed in confusion.

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"Yes, for— *someone important.*" They were simple words but his eyes bulged at her inference.

"Important? Why? You *are* important, Trix." Tears started flowing breaking a wall she never thought would be broken. The wall around her heart was now just a pile of dust left from the pain she had encased her heart. His kind words had been the final wrecking ball to her hardened heart.

Chapter 22

It was late.

The stars had already taken their places for their normal nightly dance in the sky. Cassius laid in the tall grass. Today could have gone better but he had learned a few things while he was with Aurora. First his feelings for her were very real and they were stronger than he thought possible in just a few short weeks time. He could see she cares for him too. Secondly, he figured out why she was so intent on giving in and marrying Tommit. She was scared and not even for the right reason.

She wasn't worried about herself or her impending fate.

Aurora was worried about Evver and him. This told him someone had been threatening them.

Well at least threatening *Evver*. There was no way Tommit would allow the two of them to spend time together if he thought for a split second that Cassius was a threat. A light in the window caught his eyes. It was Aurora's room. Evver had pointed it out to him yesterday. He longed to be with her. *There was no way he was going to let Tommit marry her.*

Time was dwindling.

He worried they would be too late. *Was it possible Tommit would find the wishing well before they could stop him?* Cassius wondered if Tiden and Trix had made it to Fara yet. *Would they find help? Or were they just two more victims in Tommit's reign of terror.* Seeing movement in the window he wished he could get a closer view of the castle. He wanted to talk to Aurora tonight more than his need to

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sleep—which was currently nagging at his drooping eyes. He looked forward to morning then he could see her beautiful smile.

Sleep overtook him and a familiar dark dream settled in.

A nightmare settled deep in his heart making an unwanted reminder of his pain.

*

King Calan made his way toward the north wing.

He had news that he needed to be delivered from his lips alone. He worried how the news would be taken, if it could even make it past the titanium armor surrounding her mind. He gave a knowing look at each of the wide questioning eyes, of those who spent their lives guarded her, as he passed each of them by. Each one bowing, as he walked down the corridors to her room. It was normally only a trip he took in the early mornings. There was something less depressing seeing her with the sunlight warming her gentle face.

Calan feared seeing her with only the candlelight to light the way.

Blocking her off from the prying world, were heavy wooden doors he opened them hearing a groan from their rusting hinges.

“Thank you. You may leave us,” the waiting guard nodded at him and then took a fleeting glimpse at the beauty before he left the room. King Calan walked quietly and sat in the empty chair next to

the window. It was the only view that didn't agitate her. It was the view of the neighboring Paradan that she found calming. Calan had always found it odd how the only view she found serene wasn't of Fara.

She had always had an affinity for the country. His father and now Calan never understood it.

"You look lovely," he was always at a loss for words when he looked at her vacant stare. "Did you see that the leaves are starting to change? The trees are very nice this time of year." Who would have thought that a man who could rule a kingdom, would have so much trouble speaking to his own sister?

Aura, was Calan's older sister. Calan could remember a time when she had been filled with life. She brought joy to anyone who came in contact with her then everything changed seventeen years ago. Aura, went missing for two days and when she returned her heart and mind were never the same.

Slowly she began to shut down.

Their father, King Calas, was lost. He had no idea how to comfort her. If their mother had still been alive, she would have known what to do. Aura, started spending more and more time locked away in her room. She would only leave her room for meals. It had been ten years since she had joined them for a meal. Now she never left the safety of her own room.

Aura was striking.

Long raven colored hair hung to the middle of her back. Sapphire blue eyes sparkled even when pain drenched them. Her frame was thin and frail. King Calas and now Calan always made sure she was

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dressed in the finest gowns. Fairies always made sure her hair was perfectly done. She spent all of her hours staring into the distance at the path of Paradan.

“Aura, we had some visitors arrive today. They will be staying in the castle with us.” He paused wondering if his words meant anything to her. “They arrived today seeking out our help.” Calan could see his words bouncing off her broken façade just like everything else did. He took a deep breath and sat back. “Paradan is in *crisis*.”

There was a flicker of recognition at the mention of the neighboring kingdom.

“Horrible things have been happening. Many have been killed.” Aura’s eyes started filling with moisture. “I know how father felt about Paradan, but Windom is dead there is no reason for a continued feud.” A tear fell from her icy eyes.

*

The furious flutter of fairy wings could be heard. They were quickly approaching Aura’s room. Calan was too busy trying to soothe his sister. Talas had been Aura’s handmaiden since her early teens, before that she had been her nanny. There had never been a time when she hadn’t been at the side of the woman she loved as a daughter. She was the only one who knew the secret she kept buried. It submerged her a little deeper into the pool of anguish every day. It was a daily task just keeping her head above the waters of pain.

Aura had been a vibrant, energetic, bubbly young woman before the feud destroyed her happiness forever. She would ride her beloved horse Valenet everywhere. On one of those rides her fate changed, she met Prince Windom. He was charming, kind and everything she had ever wanted.

They were in love.

Then, there was a land dispute between the neighboring kingdoms. Aura was devastated. They started meeting in secret. Their time together got further and further apart. Unable to see each other, they only communicated thru notes. Before she knew it, she was very pregnant. She was going to tell him. They made plans to run away together. Aura rushed to meet him at their bridge. Only, before she could reach it—labor began. She found herself all alone and terrified. Nearby there was an empty tree house.

Crawling inside she delivered their baby. It was the next day before she was able to leave. On the way, she heard Windom had joined in the fight against Fara. Fearing for her child she returned to their bridge. She knew she couldn't bring the child home with her.

It was only a few moments later a fairy couple found the sleeping baby.

Watching them leave with her child, only a few hours old, overcame her. She couldn't bring herself to move. Shortly after Talas found her, she returned her home and cleaned her up. Never was another word spoken of the child she left behind. It was excruciating knowing how she would never have the life of which she dreamed. Her father King Calas overreacted to her having gone missing.

He blamed King Winston and Paradan.

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So, to ensure they would never cross their path again, as well as to make sure Aura stayed safe within Fara, he had Randath planted on both sides of the path which led to Paradan. Randath in a single plant was beautiful. It produced vibrant red roses but if more than one plant got near each other they started to entangle themselves. All of the roses fell to the ground and large sharp thorns returned in place of the flowers. They were noxious weeds and there was virtually no way of ridding yourself of them, unless the entire area was burned down to ash several times. Then when the ash was left they burned it again until there was only a fine powder left. If you were lucky, they wouldn't return but most times they did.

In a matter of weeks the way to Paradan was closed off to everyone.

Aura was devastated.

She slowly began to retreat inside her own mind.

The only place she could see her child and hear Windom was to reflect upon a time when they had been happy. So she sat in her chair and watched out her window waiting for either Windom to return for her or her child. Now Windom was dead and the fantasy of reuniting with the family she held close to her heart, was a complete impossibility.

The tight grip she held on reality was breaking.

*

“What did you do?” Talas asked accusingly.

Calan’s mouth was frozen in place.

No matter how hard he tried it wasn’t willing to produce a single word of explanation.

Talas turned back to Aura her hands were caressing her face while trying to calm her.

“Aura, please. It’s alright dear.” Her words of reassurance did little to calm the shaken woman.

Her eyes were wild with fear.

“Paradan Windom_” her words came as a great shock to both of them. It had been years since Aura had spoken a single word. Talas turned back to King Calan.

“What did you tell her?”

Chapter 23

I lay quietly staring at the ceiling.

Sleep was evading me. My day continued to run thru my mind— it was on a continuous loop. It started with Cassius kissing me his lips draining all of my resolve. Then meeting and talking to Darant. That moment, would have been on my bucket list if I ever thought there was even a slight possibility. Next was the crazy hike to the wishing tree. It was beautiful on its own but when you added what it meant to so many it was overwhelming.

I reflected on the feeling of Cassius' arms as they encircled my waist, then he pulled me closer until our hearts beat as one. I could hear him whispering promises of the future I wished for and dreamed of. It was excruciating. *Feeling hope for even a split second was a second too much.* This memory would taunt me for lifetimes to come, of this I was certain. If I had remained in the real world

things would have been so much less complicated. *I wondered if Evver and Cassius's life would have been better without my intrusion.*

If I had never found the wishing well, never fell into Paradan would they have lived happily ever after?

Sleep was mixed with hours of tossing and turning. When Evver dragged me out of bed, just before the sun had even made its appearance it was met with a groan of displeasure. Her laughter was like magic.

"Aurora, there is something here for you." My eyes were forced to focus on the large object hanging from her petite hand. It was a very large basket that looked as if it had been braided together with dark slender tree limbs. I was amazed at how stunning it was. The contents were covered by a dark piece of fabric. My heart sunk.

"Another present from Tommit?" Dread filled my voice. I was disgusted every time his name slipped past my lips. Her grin grew.

"No. It's from Cas." *My heart leapt—a gift from Cassius?* I had been so horrible to him yesterday. *Why would he be sending me anything?* Her eyes encouraged me forward. Kneeling up on my bed, I crawled toward the awaiting gift. My hand was trembling as I reached up to reveal the contents of the basket. Inside, there were a set, of riding boots. They were dark chocolate and laced up the front of my shins and ended at my knees. A huge improvement from the teetering heels I had been forced to

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wear since coming to Paradan. Tan riding pants with a matching corset. A dark ruby, ruffled tunic to go underneath. A caramel cashmere cloak with a hood finished it off. It was the softest thing I had ever felt against my skin. There was a hand written note awaiting me.

Aurora,

Thought you might

be more comfortable in this. I promise

to be on my best behavior today.

Cassius

A large lump formed in my throat I fought the desire to cry.

“Well, you better hurry. I still need to work some of those snarls out of the flostrich nest on top of your head.” My hands immediately went up to my head. I couldn’t even rake my fingers thru the knots. My hair growth had slowed down but it continued to thicken. Every morning I expected to have hair to rival that of Rapunzels. Quickly I dressed and was finally able to be comfortable in my skin, first time since arriving here. I had never been a girly girl. I was always more comfortable in either sweats or jeans; it had been torture, these past weeks dressed ready for a midnight waltz.

Evver worked quickly and efficiently on making my hair presentable. My nerves were jittery my heart raced thinking of seeing Cassius today. There was also fear in my heart. A deep fear I would slip deeper into my growing feelings for the stable boy.

Would today be the day I fell too deep?

Following Evver down the hallway I expected to find our way to the kitchen but I was once again surprised. We headed down a hallway I had only seen once— yesterday. We were headed back to the barn. I wondered if Evver realized I hadn't had breakfast yet.

It wasn't like her to forget something like that.

We made it thru the door headed to the outside world. I followed her through the open door. Cassius, was waiting on the other side. He smiled faintly and bowed toward us.

"Good morning, my lady. I trust you slept well." He was speaking to me like I was a stranger. I resisted the urge to look around and see if we were being watched.

"Yes, thank you." I turned and looked at Evver she looked slightly confused, but recovered quickly.

"I will await your return." She turned to Cassius and without a single word turned and made her way back to the castle. A step behind Cassius was a beautiful ebony stallion. There was no saddle. I was nervous.

He held out his hand offering it to me.

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"I will help you up." I looked into his eyes and he could see my fear. His eyes flickered briefly then he repeated himself. "*I will help you.*"

Looking into his eyes they were warm and I trusted them with my life even with his new coldness. I took a deep breath and took his hand. With a swift fluid movement Cassius had lifted me onto the giant beast. Instantly he was seated behind me. His arms tightened around my waist. I was trembling although I wasn't sure if it was because of his close proximity or the fact the immense animal below us had started to move forward.

My breath was caught in my chest and I worried my lungs would explode due to lack of oxygen.

We raced off.

I wasn't sure where we were heading. The scenery passed quickly Cassius didn't betray our destination. After a few minutes on the massive steed I grew comfortable with the steady lope of the animal beneath me. Part of me was worried we were heading back to the wishing tree. I knew there was no way I could handle the pain again. Cassius must have felt my muscles tighten as if he knew my every thought.

"I have somewhere new I want to show you." My muscles relaxed their rigid grip on my mounting insanity. We continued another half an hour. Nervous anticipation danced through my mind

—*where were we going? Would it have the same effect on me that the wishing tree had?* Heavy trees enveloped us like an umbrella leading us gently into an awaiting path.

“Slow, boy. Good job.” He spoke quietly and calmly to the large animal who took us deeper into the forest. I wanted to ask if we were close, but I could hear the voice in my head whining “are we there yet?” I decided against it.

The darkness of the forest was overwhelming.

My heart quivered being in a strange place in the sudden darkness.

“Almost there.” His voice whispered huskily in my ear. It sent shivers down my spine that didn’t stop until it reached my toes. My whole body came alive with the way his lips brushed the back of my ear. I gripped onto my legs willing myself to stay on the hefty horse. I wanted to float up into the stars the way my heart flew with his tender touch had my mind spinning.

Far in the distance I could see a light starting to shine.

We exited the murky trees and there was a large opening where a house sat surrounded by the colossal trees. It was right out of an enchanted fairy tale. I expected to see the seven dwarves come bumbling out at any minute. There were three parts of the house each one looked like an upended acorn. Thatched roofs covered each of them. The front of the home was covered in different sized rocks; you could see how someone had put in many hours into the building of the home. Next to the home was an

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immense water wheel. Yet there wasn't an ounce of water anywhere near the home. It was confusing to me.

Strangely I felt at home near the understated dwelling.

Cassius pulled the horse to a stop, "Whoa boy." The horse stopped quickly and gently. It was as if we had only been walking forward and suddenly came to a stop. Cassius hopped down and offered me his hand. I reached out and he had slipped me down onto the rocky earth and held on to me for longer than was good for either of us. I took a quick step to the side.

"Thank you." I blushed and tried to cover by looking at the ground.

"Rirc, stay here. We will be close by." His gaze fell upon my empty hand. I could tell he thought about taking it in his, but decided against it. With a light smile he led the way toward the awaiting home. Following close behind him, I tried to take in all of the details knowing I would want to remember this place. if only in my dreams. Cassius led me around to the back door. Without taking a second to think about it, he twisted the tarnished steel doorknob and stepped inside.

I wasn't even sure where we were, but I trusted Cassius so I followed behind him.

Chapter 24

Trix woke up more rested than she thought was possible.

It took her a few minutes to realize where she was. The sun was just coming up over the mountains. She was in Fara, in the most picturesque suite. Things had turned out much differently than anyone could have guessed. Fara was willing to help them oust King Tommit. She wondered how Paradan would feel when they heard the news Fara wasn't as big and bad as they all thought.

Looking down, she was surprised to see someone had covered her up in a thick coverlet. It was the softest thing she had ever had against her sparkling skin. It had her yearning to curl up in a ball and make an eternal cocoon, but she knew she needed to get up and go check on Tiden. The last time she had seen him he was living it up. She was sure he was suffering from a food coma somewhere. He had eaten almost his weight in food before she had gone to bed.

Trix guessed he was sleeping it off somewhere close by.

She wondered what his room looked like.

Part of her wanted to get going back to Paradan. Cassius would be thrilled by their reports. Having Fara on their side and an understanding King Calas made ousting King Tommit and his band of destroyers a real possibility. They could actually have a happy life again. No more friends or family disappearing never to be heard from again. The thought lightened her heart. Pushing the cozy coverlet off of her aching body, she stretched from head to toe. Her wings were well rested after her contented night of sleep.

It had been so long since she had slept so deeply.

As if there wasn't a single worry in the world weighing on her tiny frame as she regenerated.

Trix's wings started fluttering craving flight. She relented and was in the air making her way to the door.

Dipping down for a brief second to open the heavy door it opened easily. Waiting out in the hallway was Lilet. He smiled widely at her emergence.

"Good morning, Trix." Trix smiled at the boy. She wondered how long he had been waiting at her door. His eyes were sparkling with excitement and a little touch of mischief.

"Good morning to you."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yes. It was heavenly. Thank you." Her glowing words had his smile shining.

"I can take you to breakfast. . . ." His voice trailed off, wondering if she would accept his offer.

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“That would be wonderful, but I need to check on my friend, Tiden, first.” Lilet started laughing.

“He is already at breakfast. Tiden woke up hungry, so Galen took him down early. Man . . . can he eat.” Trix giggled.

“Goodness. I thought he had eaten enough last night to last him over a month. Guess I was wrong. I would love it if you would take me to breakfast, Lilet.” The tiny boy beamed at her. He reached out to take her hand her heart grew a little at the child’s touch. They flew down the hallways and made their way back to their kitchen. It was the happiest Trix had felt in so long. Her face hurt from smiling but no matter what she tried, her happy grin remained. They entered the kitchen and hovered in the entryway. Trix couldn’t believe her eyes.

Tiden was seated at one of the tables he had been arm wrestling on last night. He had a stack of at least one hundred enormous pancakes. Too caught up in the syrupy goodness to notice his friend he gobbled down the entire stack before looking up. It was quite a sight to behold. Tiden turned his face to hear the familiar flutter of fairy wings.

*

“Trix_ There you are.” His mouth was still full of pancakes. Trix let go of Lilet’s hand and flew over and landed on the table, balancing carefully to avoid the puddles of spilled syrup.

“Hey big guy.” He smiled at her familiar name for him. She knew more than anyone how much he hated being treated like a child. He saw himself as a man since his parents had been killed. Tiden was just waiting for the rest of the world to see him the same way. “Don’t tell me you’re still hungry after that huge plate.” Tiden looked down sheepish.

“It wasn’t my first plate.” Somehow this didn’t surprise her.

“Ok— so, how many plates are we talking?”

“Twelve.” Trix was shocked.

She knew how giants ate a great deal, but the fact he could eat so much proved how little he had survived on during their trek to Fara. “But they told me to eat as much as I wanted.” The familiar long lines in his mouth were forming, the ones that formed when he thought he had done something wrong.

“That’s good. Just don’t expect a pancake eating contest out of me.” He relaxed at her words. “I was just going to eat something myself. Tiden, I want you to meet a friend of mine.” She motioned for Lilet to join them. He did so, with trepidation. Fluttering to a stop, he stepped into a position where he used Trix to shield him from Tiden’s prying eyes. Trix giggled. “Don’t worry you will like him I promise.”

Lilet stepped around her and was wringing his hands.

“Hi.”

“Hi, buddy.” Lilet smiled.

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"Tiden, this is Lilet. Lilet, this is my friend, Tiden. He has been helping me." They both smiled at each other.

"Nice to meet a friend of Trix's," Tidens words were warm and put the little fairy at ease he stepped closer to the towering giant. He carefully sidestepped the large puddle of syrup next to his new friends' plate.

"Did you sleep well?" Lilet asked, gaining his courage.

"Yes. Thank you. Galen has been very helpful. I have never felt so at home before. Everyone has been very kind to us. We weren't even sure what to expect when we walked into Fara." Lilet looked surprised.

"Really why?" He asked curiously. Tiden looked to Trix wondering how he could explain. Trix turned back to her little friend.

"Well Lilet, we were scared. We didn't know what we would find in Fara. We didn't know if you would be nice or mean." Lilet giggled.

"Mean? No one here is mean."

"We know now. It was just we were raised to fear Fara. Looking at it now we should have looked a little deeper before just blindly believing." Trix felt foolish having not come to Fara sooner.

"I understand. Sometimes meeting new people is scary, but once you do then you know they can be a friend, instead of a scary person." Lilet reached out and put his tiny hand on one of Tiden's fingers.

"Yes, always a friend." Tiden glowed with glee.

*

For the first time in years, Aura was up on her own steam and bathed before Talas came in to wake her. She was standing instead of in her usual spot, her rocking chair. Tears were still flowing, thinking of the loss of her one true love . . . Windom. Regret filled her thoughts. There were so many mistakes in her past and so much pain caused by her own choices. Talas hovered nearby leaving her alone with her grief. Aura had a right to mourn, but she wasn't only mourning for Windom. She was grieving for her child and all of the moments she had lost with her only child, all because she had been afraid.

It seemed silly now.

Aura had let fear of her father's reaction change her fate forever. There was still time to change it, but only if her child had survived the awful King Tommit. She would join in the fight to save Paradan and her child. *Would she know her child by first glance? Would there be forgiveness or would there only be fury?* At this point she was aware she deserved the fury directed at her but she knew she had to start being honest with everyone . . . including herself. Turning toward Talas, she spoke.

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"I need to see Calan. I have to tell him everything. It's my only shot at saving my child. Maybe, there might still be a chance . . ." Her words trailed off. She wasn't sure, what the future held, but she prayed it involved her having a relationship with her child.

Talas wiped away the tears as they fell from her tender eyes. "I will go get him now."

She flew out of the room with express speed. Bypassing all of the guards on the way they were used to seeing her fly in a hurry. She never left Aura, who had never been coherent for long, so when she was Talas was always in a rush. She made a beeline straight to King Calan's chamber. There was a good chance he was still sleeping but she knew his sleep would be happily interrupted for Aura. A surly guard fought her plea to wake the king, but when she told him how Princess Aura needed the king, he quietly stepped aside. She flew into his room. He was still sleeping in his immense bed. Calan had been up most of the night wondering what to do with Paradan and why the news had caused such an extreme reaction from Aura. Talas worried how he would respond to Aura's confession. She also knew if Aura got her secret out then she might resume a happy life and Talas wanted this more than her own life.

"King Calan_ King Calan_ *Wake up_ Wake up_*" Her frantic words had him sitting up ready to fight off a nearby foe. He was startled to see Talas hovering over his bed shaking her fist at him.

"Aura? Is Aura all right?" He started to jump out of his bed.

“Yes, but she wants to see you right away. *It’s very important. Please.*” This made the groggy king pause. His eyes finally focused on her. He could see the worry in her face, but also there was something new. Relief? This made him want to see Aura for himself.

“Wait outside, I will just need a moment.” She nodded and rushed through the open door. As the door shut behind her, he leaped from his bed.

*

Calan grabbed the nearest clothes he could find. When he had left Aura last night he had been incredibly disturbed. It was only when Talas told him how he was upsetting her more by being there that finally forced him to leave. All night he paced his room the weight of the world on his shoulders. Whatever he did in the next few days would change Fara and Paradan possibly forever. There was risk in every step but there was no way he could not act. He was dressed in record time. Pushing through his door he searched for Talas she was hovering nearby, glaring at the glowering guard.

“Lets’ go.” He was off and running.

She had to increase her speed just to match his pace. They arrived at Aura’s suite in no time. On their way they had several of the other guards surprised and nervous. Taking a breath before entering Aura’s room; King Calan knocked warning of his entrance. He waited for Talas to follow behind him, but she pushed her hands forward, urging him to enter on his own. He was shocked, when he pushed pass the heavy doors.

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"Aura?" He couldn't help as it slipped past his lips. Aura was standing near the window but this was different. Normally when he looked at her eyes, there was a vacant lifeless stare. Today the world reflected back in her crystal blue eyes. It gave him hope for the first time in so long. *Was she coming back to them?*

*

Aura turned to see her beloved brother standing near the door. She was certain he had dressed in a hurry because his clothes were in disarray.

"Calan." The sound of her voice sent his spirits soaring. He rushed to her, taking her hands in his "Aura— are you well?" She forced a smile.

"I am better than I have been, but I need your help to find myself again." Her words elated him.

"Anything_ "

"I will hold you to your promise, but I warn you what I am about to tell you will not be easy to hear." She waited for his nod to continue. "Years ago, I used to love life. My days were filled with my daily rides of the kingdom and beyond. One day I met someone*from Paradan*. He was all I ever wanted; he was strong, kind, loving, and generous. We fell in love immediately. We planned on marrying and then father changed it all. He initiated a war with Paradan. *I was heartsick*. My world was falling apart around me. My love and I started to meet in secret. There was no way Father would have understood. We made

plans to run away. I escaped and made my way into Paradan, we were going to meet that night, where we had first met for that very night." She paused as the pain rushed through her, reliving the agonizing moments.

*

He couldn't imagine that she had suffered in silence this entire time. This answered so many of his questions. Calan would never be prepared for the words that came next.

*

"As I was traveling, I became sick. The pain was like nothing I had ever experienced in my entire life. I found a nearby vacant home and crawled inside. It was the worst thing I have ever experienced. I was so alone. *so scared*. Then the impossible happened—I gave birth." Calan gasped in shock. Tears started building in his eyes.

"*A baby?*" He whispered, with pain choking his voice.

"Yes. My baby." It felt so good to say it out loud. Aura had been holding it in for so long it was beginning to feel like a dream. "I was so terrified. I loved my child instantly. I couldn't wait to show my love our child. It was the next morning before I was able to move. While delivering our child I had missed meeting him. Rushing to the bridge, the whole way I hoped he had waited for me. Then, I heard others

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talking. Windom had joined in with King Winston and the war against us.” Her eyes rose to meet his.

Calan looked dumbfounded. “Windom?”

“Yes. Now that you know who I love Loved. Maybe you will be more understanding of what came next. Calan I was terrified you have to understand. Bringing my child home to our Father would have been the right thing to do; but I worried how he would react when he learned who fathered his grandchild. *I panicked.* Taking my newborn child, I told him how much I loved him and how sorry I was. I bundled him up and put him on the bridge—then I waited. In minutes there was a fairy couple arrived they looked for my baby’s family. When they didn’t find me, they took him with them.”

“A son? You have a son?” Aura nodded thru the tears.

“I have a son. You realize this is the first time I have said those words out loud? It feels good. Can you understand why I was heartbroken yesterday when you told me that Windom was dead? Fear seized me, when you said many had been killed. All I could think about was my child. *Was he alive? Was I too late? Had I lived in my misery so long that I had lost any chance of knowing my son?* Calan, we have to help them. ***We have to find my son.***” Aura’s voice had lost any of the sadness which she had started with. It was fierce and powerful.

*

It brought him great joy, even in the sadness she had suffered, to hear that he was an uncle.

“Aura, why didn’t you tell me? I would have helped you. Of course we will find your child. I will move heaven and earth to bring your son home to you.” Reaching out, he took his sister in his arms and hugged her.

Chapter 25

Cassius stopped short after walking into the vacant home.

I ran into him, thinking he would keep walking. I fumbled as my hands touched his back. His hand grabbed one of mine and he held it strong. Trying to pull away was not in his plans when I did he just pulled me closer. Giving into him, I could feel a change in his mood. I looked around the room and could see a quaint home. Whoever had lived here had put a lot of love into decorating it and keeping it. Sadly, an inch of dust had accumulated on all of the surfaces.

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I wondered why anyone would leave such a wonderful comfy retreat.

“This is the first time I have been *home* since my father died.” It hit me hard. *This was Cassius’ home_* He had grown up here. My heart softened knowing what it must have taken for him to bring me to this painful reminder.

“Oh... Cassius.” My brain was blank. *What words could I say that would make any part of this ok?* The answer was simple, none.

“So, there are many memories. happy memories. I had an incredible childhood. My parents both loved me fiercely. Even though I was different from the rest of them that didn’t stop them from treating me like I was one of the family. The only reason I ever knew I was different was the simple fact that I didn’t have wings.” He laughed remembering something. “I used to pray at night I would wake up in the morning and my wings would appear. It was so silly, I know, but I honestly believed it was a possibility. I was twelve years old before I realized it wasn’t going to happen.” Cassius stepped forward toward the large wooden table in front of us.

“My mom used to make sure we were all home in time for family dinners. It was a little thing but she was always so happy when we were around the table together. What I wouldn’t give for just one more of those dinners. You would have loved my father. He was a joker. There wasn’t a day that passed where he didn’t have us all laughing. He was also strong and fierce, when he needed to be. My dad wouldn’t

accept anyone taking advantage of anyone. This is why he fought against Tommit. He would have done anything to save my mom and my sisters. And he did— he died for us.” My heart was breaking and I didn’t know how to heal his pain. I doubted anything could.

“My mom.” He paused, looking toward the small kitchen just off of the dining area. “She is— was. . . . I don’t even know if she is alive. It makes me crazy. She is the reason Evver snuck out. Evver wanted to find her and bring her home. Evver was so sure she was going to be here, at home waiting for her to return. Everywhere I look around here there are ghosts taunting me. I couldn’t save my dad and now possibly my mom. My sister will never fly again. Do you have any idea what that feels like? I was supposed to protect her. I’m her big brother. I failed. Now you—” He turned back, to look me, straight in the eyes. The pain in his eyes nearly brought me to my knees.

“Cassius, don’t.” I pleaded.

“Aurora, don’t what? Tell the truth? Every second that passes is one closer to Tommit taking you as his bride? The thought makes me physically ill. To think he could touch you, I would rather die than ever let that happen.”

“NO_” my shocked gasp escaped my trembling lips. Cassius rushed to me, standing only inches from my quivering form.

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"I love you, Aurora." I bit my lip from responding. "I have loved you from the moment you first walked into the kitchen. The thought of not living my life, with you by my side, is excruciating. I'm sorry. I know I promised to behave myself but I can't help it. Being here, where my family was whole, remembering my parents and the love they had for each other, I know just how life can change in an instant. If I didn't tell you how I felt and lost you, because of my silence, then I could never live with it." I was stunned. I never thought this moment would happen, not to me.

"Cassius, I . . ." How could I do this?

"Trust me, Aurora. Please," his pained plea broke through the barrier I had been holding up for as long as I could remember. "*Please.*" I took a deep breath, my heart shuddered. I was at a crossroad. My heart had been hiding from the simple truth. I knew my feelings for Cassius were strong. Part of me wouldn't allow myself to truly immerse myself in them knowing what my future held. I looked into his flaming eyes while desire flowed from every muscle he held tight. No breath flowed out of his perfect lips. Now, was the time and I jumped.

"I love you, too. I do, but this can't happen. I am still trying to figure out what is real and what is a dream. I feel like Alice in Wonderland and any minute I'm going to wake up and all of this . . . you will only be a *dream.*" His eyes were blazing with passion.

"You love me?" Of course that was all that he would hear.

I took a deep breath before whispering a single word, "Yes."

Before I could say another word, he pulled me to him and his lips found mine. This time I didn't fight him. I gave into my feelings and let myself feel for the first time. My whole body was on fire. It was painful. . . . at first, it was as if my body had been forever frozen in a block of ice and with this kiss, the ice was forever melted away. Our souls melded together. I knew whatever happened in the future, both of us had been forever changed. When we finally parted, my lips longed for more. "I love you Aurora. Forever."

A new round of burning overtook me my heart was swollen with all of the emotions it was trying to process. I knew I would regret it later, but I responded. "I love you too Cassius. Always." As I said it, I knew it would always be the one truth I could always cling to.

*

Cassius led me out to the backyard.

There were bushes and bushes of beautiful red flowers in bloom. I found that strange, seeing how the leaves were already changing. It was beautiful. Large trees encircled the back yard. The deep crimson flowers created a half circle, keeping us safe from the darkness of the looming forest. Hand hewed logs were carved into benches, which made for a cozy conversation area. In the middle was a large fire pit. A fire was dancing sparking and sizzling in the early morning air. I could feel the heat from where I stood. I wondered who had already been here this morning to set it up. A large basket sat next to one of

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the benches. It looked just like the one my clothes came in, for today. Cassius squeezed my hand and led me toward the awaiting bench. He brushed off the fallen leaves and motioned for me to take a seat. I did and he reached from the basket and took a thick blanket and draped it over my lap.

“Hungry?” I nodded and he chuckled. “Don’t worry, I doubt Evver would let us starve.” He reached inside the basket and pulled out a large loaf of bread. It was followed by cheeses and a bounty of fruit. We both ate until we couldn’t eat anymore. My stomach was complaining. Cassius added more wood to the fire; it caused it to grow by three feet. Then, he sat next to me. We watched the fire for several minutes, listening to the crackling of the wood. He broke the silence.

“Tell me about your life before Paradan.” It was a simple request, but one that terrified me.

“Why?”

“I want to know everything I can about you. You know everything there is to know about my life but I know nothing of yours.” He was right. I feared how he would react to my confession.

“I’m not really sure it would help anything if I told you. My guess is you will take off running and leave me sitting here.” He reached over taking my hands in his. They were warm and he used them to pull my hands to his chest.

“That would *NEVER* happen.” His eyes were fierce and so was his voice. It wasn’t going to be easy but I figured I would do what you do when you pull off a band-aid. The faster the better. There was

less pain this way anyway. I turned back to watch the roaring fire. I was afraid to tell him while looking into his icy blue eyes.

“It’s hard to explain. I told you I was running from someone. That is the truth. Where I lived there were several people who insisted on making my life difficult. I’ll never understand why. They gave me this, the last time I had encountered them.” I lifted my cape and shirt to reveal the scar on my arm. I heard him mutter something darkly under his breath. Knowing if I turned to see his face I wouldn’t be able to continue so I looked in the distance and resumed my story.

“My world is very different from here. Here there are fairies, giants, trolls and dwarves. They are all considered to be make-believe where I come from—parts of fairy tales. This is part of why I feel like I am dreaming. Most of this world doesn’t seem real. There was a place where I loved to go. In my world, I didn’t have anyone to turn to. I had no friends. An old wishing well sat at the top of the hill in my town. I could go up there and hide from the world and no one would bother me— until the day I arrived in Paradan, anyway. There was nowhere to hide. So I hid in the only place I could think of and climbed into the big bucket inside of the well. I hid there until I couldn’t hear them any longer. When I tried to climb out. I fell into the well.” I waited for disbelief on his part, but he was silent. “I blacked out on the way down, when I woke up I was in Paradan and Cronan was standing over me. You know the rest of

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the story from there." I sat quietly waiting for him to run off . . . to find the nearest authority to haul me off to the Looney farm.

"Ecracias' wishing well."

"What?" I asked more confused now.

"I know where you're talking about. Do you remember where it was that Cronan found you?"

His voice was excited and his eyes were sparkling with joy. After all I had told him he was worried about the well.

"Why do you want to send me back?" the pain in my voice broke thru his glee.

"Send you back?" I could see the reality of my words hitting him over and over. I wanted to take it back, apologize, turn back time even and never say it in the first place. He reached out taking my face in his hands. Cassius kept saying the word no over and over again. He pulled me to him and when I felt his tears on my head I realized he finally understood the gravity of my words. I'm not sure what did it. It may have been finally confiding in someone. Or, maybe it was because I had finally realized the depth of my feelings for Cassius and he felt the same. Tears started falling, first one at a time. Then, it was as if my reserve levees had been breached. When I finished crying, Cassius' shirt was soaked. I felt foolish. While I had been having my breakdown his grip had encircled me protecting me from my storm. Now, his grip loosened just enough to bring my eyes to meet his.

"I'm so sorry, Aurora. On my honor, the thought of you going anywhere, except here with me, never entered my mind. When you said the wishing well, it answered so many questions. Tommit has been searching for it. If he finds it before we do" his voice trailed off fear entered his eyes. "All we have done to try to reclaim the kingdom will be futile. Ecraicias wishing well is the most powerful piece of magic left in Paradan. If Tommit finds it and the golden Para's there would be little that he could *not* do. He would be *unstoppable*."

My heart sunk.

I was already a witness to Tommit's destruction and that was without magic. So many lives had already been destroyed, families torn apart. *When would the terror end? Would Evver and Cassius be the next set of casualties in Tommit's power play?*

"*We can't let that happen_*" I jumped up from the bench, in the process pushed Cassius off of the bench. "We have to do something_ I can't let anything happen to you . . . to Evver." There were so many people I had grown to love in my short time here. Cassius stood and walked toward me.

"We *are* doing something. I have been working on it. There are so many others searching for others to join the fight. We even sent some of our own to Fara seeking help. To be honest one of the only ones fighting me well . . . is you." The crooked grin I loved, was taunted me. "Are you still going to fight me?"

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I looked at him and glowered. *He made me crazy_* “Cassius, you just don’t get it.”

“What don’t I get? Tell me. I know there is more you have been holding back from me. Unless you tell me everything, I can’t fix it. I didn’t go running off, now did I?” I couldn’t help but laugh.

“No— but,” he held up his hands to stop me.

“No buts_” I turned to look at the still roaring fire.

“It’s— Drayben. He told me if I didn’t go along with the engagement and then the wedding, that he would kill Evver. Cassius he is *dangerous*. He knew things he shouldn’t have. Things I said to Evver when it was just the two of us. If anything ever happened to her because of me. . . .” I couldn’t finish the thought. “Don’t you know that I would rather die a thousand times than ever have anything happen to her? *Or you. . . .*” I couldn’t finish.

“I will kill him with my bare hands.” His voice was seething. Cassius gripped both of my shoulders and turned me back to him. Normally, his face was gentle and kind, but now it was filled with rage and fury. . . .something I had never witnessed from my gentle stable boy. I wanted to say something to soothe him, but I was lost for words. I understood his anger, most days I shared it, but understanding and dealing with it, were two very separate things.

He pulled me to him and wrapped his arms around me so tight I worried about breathing.

His whole body shook with fury.

Chapter 26

Drayben was on his way to King Tommit, to give him an update on the search.

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He didn't have good news. Cronan and a large group of Destroyers hadn't been successful in their search for the wishing well. They had searched every inch of Paradan, but the wishing well remained hidden. One of the Para's also remained an enigma. When they had been tasked at finding the wishing well, everyone knew it was a long shot. Magically hidden from the world it was protected from anyone stumbling across it. Drayben knew he would be furious over their failure.

With every step he was busy trying to salvage Something positive.

Drayben approached King Tommit, he was standing near one of the windows it that looked out onto the kingdom. He was deep in thought and Drayben didn't want to startle him. It was clear from his expression that he was lost in the dark passages which consumed his depraved mind. Several minutes passed, before he dare spoke "Sire?"

*

Tommit shook his head as if he was shaking cobwebs from of his mind. He turned back to see Drayben fidgeting behind him.

"What is it?" Tommit already feared the news Drayben was about to deliver. Nothing was going the way he had planned. So much work had gone into this. Revenge had fueled him for as long as he could recall. He had been disgraced in Rartan, denied the one thing he wanted. He still dreamed about

what his life would have been if Solin would have agreed to Tommit's request to marry Ellet. Just because he had no royal blood coursing through his veins, he had been denied.

He remembered a time when his actions here in Paradan would have brought him great shame; any light left in him had disappeared when news of Ellet's death reached him. She had died from a riding accident. At least this was the story the kingdom was told. King Solin knew if word got out of how she had taken one of his prized daggers to her own heart, the kingdom would have been outraged. They would have demanded answers. None of which would have painted the grieving king in a positive light. The only way he had found out the truth behind the tragic news was thru one of her ladies in waiting.

Ceile knew how much Ellet loved Tommit. She wanted him to know the truth. Ceile paid dearly for her omission. Her body was found a couple of days later floating down the Kregte River. It was a slap in the face to Tommit. He had first met Ellet there while on a ride.

It was no accident that her body had been dumped there.

Lesser men would have given up and taken their blade to their chest, but not him. Instead he allowed the bitterness to blacken every recess of his pained heart. He was not going to rest until King Solin was down on his knees begging for mercy. Then when he ran his own dagger thru King Solin's vile heart would Tommit be able to relax again. It was one night while he was wallowing in a drunken stupor that he'd found Drayben. They were in a local tavern when Drayben was ranting and raving about King

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Solin. Tommit had stayed to himself, but followed Drayben out. A friendship was forged from their shared hatred of the dark king.

When it started, neither of them realized the extent either of them would have to go to in order to fulfill their plans. Hundreds had died at their hands and their command. Both of their hearts had been turned so wicked it didn't matter to them anymore anyway. Staring out at Paradan, Tommit could feel his hold slipping. Drayben was fidgeting and he only did that when he had bad news.

"What is it?" He shouted, his whole body trembling.

*

"Sorry. It's just. . . . We have been unable to find the Wishing well. They have searched every inch of Paradan. I don't understand it." He hung his head down, not daring to meet his kings' gaze. He expected a raging bull but got only silence. That scared him more.

"Sire, what are you thinking?"

*

Laughter escaped his mouth; it had an edge of hysteria. "What am I thinking? I am thinking that we have lost. King Solin will never kneel before me. All of our plans are crumbling before my very eyes. That is what I am thinking." He stared at his confidante awaiting a response.

"We aren't done yet." His words had more confidence than Tommit thought to be realistic.

“Why? Because we’re still lucky enough to be living in the castle? We aren’t bleeding on the ground in a ditch somewhere?” Is that why?” His tone was mocking and hard.

*

Drayben took a deep breath. “No, my king we are not done yet. You still have a wedding, if you have forgotten.” The look in Tommit’s eye said showed that he had. He didn’t give him a chance to argue with him he continued. “I say we move the wedding up to tomorrow morning. We can do just a small ceremony. I will officiate. You will make Aurora your bride and in a few days you will introduce her to the kingdom as their queen. Hopefully, by then you will already have an heir on the way.”

*

Tommit’s eyes danced with the possibilities.

“Yes. I like that. Maybe spending some time with Aurora will take my mind off of the other matters. I like this plan very much. Thank you my friend. Do what you need to make it happen and I will see you in the morning. I could use a good night's sleep seeing as how it will be my last chance to do so for a while.” He raised his eyebrows suggestively. They both laughed.

“Of course, your highness. Good night.” Tommit left to head to his bed chamber. Drayben headed to Lote. She would have to be told about the rescheduling. He had her preparing the dress. No one else would be aware of the scheduling change.

He did not the wedding disturbed.

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Chapter 27

Aurora fell asleep, shortly after she returned. For the first time, she slept peacefully and with a smile on her face. She had been too tired to tell Evver what had transpired while she was with Cassius but one look at her glowing eyes and beaming smile Evver knew it was good. She had promised her young friend she would fill her in, the morning.

Evver had worked hard in the castle today.

She thought she would find sleep easily tonight. Instead a feeling of unease had settled into her chest. The young fairy tried to dismiss it, but it persisted. Unable to find the slumber she searched for, she decided to go and get something to drink. Perhaps it would settle her enough to sleep. Reber normally kept a warm pot of milk on the stove top. She walked down the darkened hallway without the use of a candle. Evver had become accustomed to making her way in the darkness. As a young child she used to be afraid of the dark, but as she had learned there were real monsters in the world; the darkness had

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become a comforting friend. As she neared the kitchen she could hear voices coming from down the hallway.

She froze in her tracks she waited to see if they were coming her way. The voices stayed static, unmoving. Evver took tentative steps as she inched closer to the warming light. Recognizing the voices her heart sunk, it was Lote and Drayben. Evver wanted to run in the opposite direction but she was also curious as to why they were meeting so late at night.

“Tomorrow? If I work all night, then I can have it done.” Lote said reluctantly.

“Then you must. King Tommit and Aurora will marry in the morning and I want her to look like a queen.” Evver inhaled sharply. Thankfully they didn’t notice. She did not stay behind to hear the rest of the sordid details; instead she rushed toward the stables. It was the least guarded spot around the castle. Some nights Cassius even slept there. She had to find him. He had to know. Evver moved as quickly as her tiny feet could carry her.

She prayed all the way that she would make it to Cassius in time.

*

Evver was frantic.

She had tried all of the normal safe houses where they had previously stayed. Cassius was nowhere to be found. There wasn’t much time. If she didn’t find him soon then it would be too late for

all of them. How she longed for the ability to fly. It would make things so much easier. Her tiny legs could only move so fast. She sat down on a large rock, racking her brain at the options that she hadn't considered. During the time she had known her, Evver had come to love Aurora like a sister. She knew that Aurora loved Cassius; she could see it on his face whenever she saw him, or spoke about him.

Cassius was more vocal about his feelings for Aurora.

He had loved her from the beginning.

Her parents had told her about love at first sight.

She was certain this is what happened with Cassius and Aurora. If only *life* would stop working against them. Then it hit her. *Her parents*. Could Cassius be in their home? She hadn't been there in so long. It was a long shot, but there was nowhere else that she could think of to find him. Taking a deep drink she jumped up and moved as fast as her little legs would carry her in the direction of home.

*

Evver entered the back door to her family home.

It was silent. It was almost eerily quiet. In the days when her family had lived here there was always laughter and joyous noise coming from every direction. She could see light coming from the back yard. She made her way outside, she saw Cassius lying on one of the benches asleep.

*

Cassius, was deep in slumber.

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He was relaxed, for the first time in weeks, enough to sleep. Aurora loved him. Now he knew for sure he that was willing to fight any fight to have her. It was a strange sensation, he felt like someone was calling his name. He was being shaken awake. His gaze fell on a figure standing over him.

“Cassius_ Cassius you have to wake up_” She was shouting at him. It was Evver—she never shouted.

“Evver? What are you doing here?” He forced his eyes to focus on his little sister. Panic overtook him when he realized his sister was off the castle grounds. He sat up so fast that his head spun.

“Come on, Cassius, we have to go.” She was pulling on his arm, trying to drag him.

“Evver, stop it_ What is going on? You have to tell me, now_” He could see the familiar look of fear on his sister’s face. She slumped to the bench and tears started to flow.

“Cas, I went to get something to drink and I overheard Drayben and Lote talking. They moved up the wedding. Tommit is going to marry Aurora **TODAY**_ We have to go_ You can’t let this happen. . . .” Tears overtook her voice.

He reached over and hugged her gently. Fear and fury raced through him. Today? How could this be happening? Just when they admitted they loved each other and now Tommit was going to take her forever. He would never let it happen. . . . *he would die first*_

“What are we waiting for?”

“You can’t go alone.” Evver’s tears were starting to dry. Cassius thought about this and realized he needed a way to distract Evver from being in the middle of things.

“I know. I need you to go and get Abow. He has been in the safe house just past the wishing tree. He will be able to bring help. Go now.” Cassius leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. “Be safe, birdie. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She gave him a quick hug and was off.

*

Cassius went into his parent’s room.

Flipping their bed up, he started digging. Buried deep under their bed was the family sword. Most of the weapons in the kingdom had been destroyed or confiscated by Tommit’s Destroyers. His father had hidden this before the uprisings. His hands were raw and bleeding before he found the steel sword. As soon as his fingers wrapped their way around the handle he was determined and on fire. Whistling for his horse, he was already running when the horse caught up with him. He jumped on and they were off. It was a long shot, but Evver would find Abow. Cassius prayed that he would be finished with Tommit and all would be settled before, Evver made it anywhere near the castle.

He was still unsure of what exactly he was going to do when he got there.

His only plan?

Well it was simple—*storm the castle and rescue Aurora.*

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*

I woke to find Evver gone.

This was normal. She normally rushed off to get my breakfast and all the things I would need before waking me. *Today, I was too excited.* I had dreamed of my day with Cassius and couldn't wait to spend another with him. By the time he brought me home last night I was actually feeling *hope* for the future. My face hurt, from smiling so much.

My heart was full, thinking of the promise that our future held. Paradan was turning out to be my idea of a fairy tale after all. I rolled over and looked out my window. The sun was just starting to peek its way above the mountain tops. The door opened, I turned to welcome Evver. My heart dropped when I realized that it wasn't Evver.

It was Drayben.

He held a dress in his hands. It was large and looked suspiciously like a wedding gown. My chest hurt. This couldn't be happening. He shut the door and skulked toward me with a swamy smile on his face.

"Time to wake up, Aurora. It's a big day for you."

"*No_ Not yet.*" My voice was shaking and I could see by the expression on his face that he found it funny. *I hated him.* "Why now? I thought I still had another week at least?"

“All I can say is King Tommit can’t wait to make you his bride. I expect you to be the glowing, blushing bride. I am sending in some of the staff to assist you with your preparations. Don’t make it difficult for them or *yourself*. I will see you soon.” He dropped my dress on my bed. “I can’t wait to see you in this.” The look in his gaze was lustful and made me feel dirty.

“Where’s Evver?”

“That isn’t my concern now get ready.”

Drayben turned and headed out the door. I wanted to cry but I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of seeing my tears.

As the door shut I crumpled to the floor, tears breaking free.

Chapter 28

The Wishing Well

My mind and body were at war.

I wanted to run anywhere, but here. I'd forced my body to comply with the wishes of those dressing me. If there was any chance that Drayben had Evver held up somewhere, I had to follow, comply willingly. Even the beauty of the gown didn't warm my cold skin. It was off-white and embroidered from head to toe. The bodice was fitted and tight to my waist and then it flared out in a large bell shape. The top was open, baring my shoulders; the sleeves opened up in a V-shaped at my wrists. Fairies dressed me methodically and carefully.

I admit, there was little I did to help the process.

I felt as if I stood there like the walking dead I felt like.

They started on my hair. It was gathered in many braids, and then they were braided together, forming roses around my head. Most of my hair was left down and curled. Calla lilies were threaded into the roses. It was a really beautiful effect. My skin was pale, drained of any joy in the moment. It would have been more fitting had I been dressed in all black. After all, I was heading to my own funeral; at least, that is how it felt.

As I waited for my escort, I walked to the window.

Dark clouds were starting to encroach upon the light blue sky. It was almost like Mother Nature was feeling the pain of the day before me and wanted to hide all light from the world. I could feel the darkness overtaking me and I welcomed it.

If it numbed the pain. . . .

I had imagined my wedding day a million times before. *What little girl hasn't?* Nothing about today was ever in my daydreams—nightmares, possibly. A voice at the door sent a sinking feeling in the pit of my abdomen. Drayben.

He pushed his way into the room.

The familiar look of desire filled his beady gaze. "King Tommit will be very pleased." He licked his lips in the vilest way. He always disgusted me, but today he had me wanting to vomit. Reaching out his hand for me to take I did so without a thought. If I really thought about where he was leading me, then I wouldn't have the courage to follow.

He led me out of my room and down the labyrinth of hallways I had come to know over these past few weeks. With each step the reality of my new life pushed me closer to the brink of despair. I was silent as I walked. With each step, my body started to go numb. If I had a choice then this is the way I wanted it.

It was a simple gift I could give myself.

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"I expect you to put on a happy glow by the time we arrive in the throne room. King Tommit will never know of your—*ambivalence*. He is expecting a eager bride and he is going to get just that _"

My pace slowed and my gaze remained frozen on the passing floor. *How could I fake the joy he demanded?* As I slowed he roughly dragged me violently down the hall. There was no way my reluctance was going to deter him from his mission. As we arrived at the throne room, the doors were closed. I hopeful there had been a mistake. . . . maybe, somehow, all of this was just a bad dream. He reached out and pulled on the cumbersome door. With a simple movement the door was open and Drayben was pulling me through. I wanted to fight him. Run, scream and punch him all at the same time. I even considered pulling one of the mounted swords off the wall and running it thru his blackened heart. My tortured gaze was caught by movement near the throne. It was Tommit. He was pacing back and forth. As soon as he heard our entrance, he turned toward us. His anxious gaze found mine. Tommit smiled.

It disgusted me.

I felt Drayben's fingers dig into my flesh. Bruises were already forming from his infuriated grasp. I forced a smile.

"Ah, finally." His words of relief were so far from how I felt, I wondered how it could be.

"Yes. Your lovely bride-to-be is ready." With one of his hands he pushed me forward so that I was standing in front of the king.

“My . . . you look delicious Aurora.” Tommit salivated as he looked at me from head to toe. I felt grimy. More than anything I wanted Cassius to be standing in Tommit’s place. “Come, let’s get on with this.” Tommit reached out and waited for me to put my hand in his. I knew the second I did that any hope for a new destiny went out the window. I felt Drayben’s spindly fingers dig into my back. Realizing I still didn’t know where Evver was, I took a deep breath and complied. I remember the first time my hand entwined with Cassius’ hands; heat coursed through me and caused fever among my nerves.

Having Tommit’s hand in mine only caused an icy layer of frost to form over my heart. Leading me over to a makeshift arch that someone had been hastily decorated with flowers and candles. The fact that we were the only wedding guests surprised me. Tommit always loved a show.

Drayben took his place in front of us.

What _

Drayben was going to officiate_?_? The thought had my stomach swaying. There was no one ready to charge these two monsters that held my fate in their hands. Tommit tightened his fingers around my trembling hand. He pulled me toward the salivating Drayben, I lowered my gaze . . . unable to watch the tragedy as it unfolded.

*

Cassius dug his heels deeper into Axis.

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His loyal steed's pace quickened. There was no telling what he would find when he arrived at the castle. Luck was on his side, Tommit hadn't called the kingdom to witness their union. There was still hope that he could make it before Tommit sealed their future. His face was scratched and bleeding already. The trees were grabbing at them, as if they were trying to slow their progress. It didn't matter what he suffered, as long as he made it in time. He rounded the corner and the castle welcomed him. There were many guards surrounding the fortress. They were dressed as if they were prepared for a battle. Cassius decided to take the friendly approach first.

He slowed as he came close to the awaiting guard.

"Hoe, boy."

"Halt." Two guards crossed their blades blocking his access.

"Morning. I am due for Aurora's riding lessons." The guards looked perplexed.

"Sorry, but we were told no one was allowed entrance."

"Everything alright? Do I need to bring Darant to King Tommit? Is he in — *danger*?" They seemed relieved at my concern. They relaxed their blades.

"No, everything is fine."

Cassius blew a deep breath out. "Thank the heavens. What a relief." He knew he was overreacting but he was hopeful they would buy into it. "You are all doing a great job here. King Tommit should be proud to have you defending Paradan." Both of their chests puffed out in pride.

"Thank you." One of the guards boasted with pride.

"Well, I better get in there. I would hate to keep King Tommit waiting." Cassius kept his tone light and friendly.

"Sure, sure. We would hate to upset his highness." He stepped aside, allowing Cassius to pass by them. Using all of the control left in him, he moved as slowly as Axis would allow. He had made it past the drawbridge and thru the upended gate. With every step he was one step closer to rescuing Aurora.

Chapter 29

I wondered if I had blacked out.

The Wishing Well

Tommit had his arm around my waist and his grin was a mile wide. Drayben looked like he had won the lottery. I hated that seeing my pain brought them so much joy. They were delusional, if for one second, they thought I was anything but destroyed over what was transpiring in front of my eyes.

“Your highness, do you take Aurora to be your bride?”

“I do.”

“Aurora, do you take Tommit to be your *master* and husband.” Do you promise to do whatever is asked of you? Will you *honor, obey* and bend your *will to his?*” Before I could answer, there was a loud noise coming from one of the entries to the throne room. We all spun in the direction of the racket. Charging in like one of the Prince’s in one of my favorite fairy tales . . . was Cassius__ He rode in on a black stallion. His eyes were shining with fire. With a simple movement he had dismounted from his horse and charged us waving a steel sword.

“**Get away from her__**” his voice thundered. Every muscle in his body was tense and he looked like he had grown a couple of feet. Drayben and Tommit looked at each other and chuckled.

“Excuse me *stable boy*,” Tommit said with disgust and superiority dripping from his voice. “To *whom* do you think you’re speaking to?” Tommit’s voice was full of amusement. I knew it had to be a rarity, if not a first for him to be spoken to like that.

"I'm speaking to you— *vile monster.*" My eyes were frozen open in terror. He was going to get himself killed. Our gazes met, mine pleading for him to run. While his was nothing less than unwavering, I knew then that there was nothing I could do to sway him.

His words sparked anger in Tommit.

"*Why you. . .*" Taking steps toward him, I grabbed his arm to stop him. This angered Drayben who in turn tried to release my grip from his king. We must have looked, a sight. With my free hand I desperately tried to push Drayben away.

"Stupid girl _" he spat in my face. His blood was boiling at my insolence. Using both of his spindly, but strong hands, he tore me from Tommit. My dress was ripped in the process. The sound of the tearing fabric stopped Tommit short. *I should be embarrassed.* The tear revealed my corset but I was grateful for the distraction. I prayed Cassius would use it to slip away, but he never did anything the easy way. He used Tommit's distraction as a way to encroach upon us.

For once, I was grateful Tommit's guards appeared to have the day off. I would deal with Tommit staring at my chest all day, if it gave Cassius the upper hand. Cassius raised his sword it was in mid swing when Drayben noticed.

"STOP _"

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Tommit turned just in time to duck the oncoming blade. Cassius went rushing past me moving with the momentum of his powerful swing. Drayben, ever-the-coward, stuck his leg out just in time to trip Cassius. He went flying into the marble floor. A sickening crack resonated through the room.

“Well done.” Tommit said with a smug smile.

I wanted to knock it from his face. Bright red blood sharply contrasted against the white floor. Knowing Cassius was hurt caused bile to rise up my throat. I forced myself to swallow it. Tommit whistled loudly. My gaze was focused on Cassius. Pulling himself off of the now blood splattered ground, he reached up and wiped the blood from his face. I could see it was flowing from a rather large gash above his left eye. It was already swelling. The fire remained blazing violently in his hypotonic blue eyes. He lifted his sword to challenge Tommit.

Tommit drew his sword matching Cassius’ movement. Drayben pulled me back to him, holding me tightly against his body. The clank of the steel swords slamming against each other rang in my ears. I wanted to cower, but I couldn’t bring myself to look away. Feeling the familiar sting of threatening tears, one of the rear doors slammed open. Not even the explosion of noise could steal my gaze.

“Over here, now__” It was Drayben’s voice; I searched for his target. Cronan and several guards were rushed inside. Swords were drawn, each of their faces were contorted in twisted malevolent masks of hate.

A cry of fear was caught in the back of my throat.

I thought for sure they were going to take Cassius down but instead they encircled us. Cronan took over for Drayben his grimy hands encircled my trembling limbs. The familiar stench of rotted meat assaulted my nostrils. It caused me to sway with nausea. He pulled me closer to his adrenaline filled quaking form. It only made my feelings of terror worse. Tommit raised his sword, aiming at Cassius' head. My breathing stopped_

It was blocked by Cassius sword. The sound of the two swords banging against each other jarred my heart. I struggled to free myself from Cronan's putrid stench. He laughed darkly, enjoying my discomfort. . . . of this I was certain.

"So, you want to challenge the *King*, do you?" Tommit sneered at Cassius. Clang, clang. . . as the swords traded blows.

"When we find the *rightful* king, I would gladly challenge him to a fun little duel." He said, mocking him. Tommit growled and his brow furrowed with fury. I could see the hatred he held for Cassius. Tommit thought he was above everyone and being mocked by a "stable boy", as he put it, was more than he would ever tolerate.

"You will die for your insolence. Then my wedding will conclude before your blood has dried." Tommit's threat of marrying me caused a new darkness to overcome Cassius. I had never seen him take

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on the features of pure hate before. I wasn't sure if it was the thought of me marrying Tommit or if it was just his proverbial final straw. He charged at Tommit while yelling, he sounded more like a wounded animal than the man I loved. Tommit thought he was ready for him, but Cassius pretended to swing right and then quickly swung left. He sliced deeply into Tommit's shoulder. Blood started seeping through his layers of fabric.

For a moment, he stood there looking dumbfounded; he couldn't believe Cassius had actually injured him. Several guards moved toward them. There were too many for Cassius to fight off by himself. In no time, they had him bound and on display for Tommit. My stomach was churning, my heart aching.

"Cas. . ." I managed to whisper. He turned to look at me, pain filled in his eyes. Tommit was busy being bandaged. I used this time to continue gazing at the love of my life—knowing we didn't have much more time. He never took his gaze from mine. Even though no words were spoken, our eyes said it all. Our love, our hopes for the future together, our dreams of forever, we both knew it was ending and there was nothing we could do about it.

Chapter 30

Tommit's shiny steel sword tickled the lump which had formed in Cassius' throat.

I fought against the manacles which held me back, keeping me from ripping Tommit's face off.

Any thoughts of my ripped dress were far from my mind. I kicked and tried to bite Cronan hoping that if I connected just right that he would release me. His sinister laugh echoed in my ears. This only enraged me more.

I threw my head back; my skull connected with his gnarly nose. A growl escaped his throat.

I used the moment to rush at Tommit. I pushed him with all of my might he fell hard to the ground his sword cut deep into his right cheek. Blood gushed from his open wound. A look of shock and then a look of desire passed his eyes. He climbed up before I made it the other two steps to Cassius we were being swarmed by Destroyers. They had Cassius in a headlock before I could shout *NO_* Tommit walked toward me. Now, I was being held by two guards. He reached up and caressed my cheek.

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"It's all right. I like my women . . . *Feisty.*"

As he wiped the fallen blood from his face, a dark smile filled his features. His vile laugh was shared by the other guards, and who encircled us. More than anything, in that moment, I wanted to lunge at him and with one movement cut his head off with his own sword. It surprised me that I thought, I was even capable of such violence. Walking toward me he reached out and grabbed me by my hair. A small gasp of pain escaped my lips before I was able to stop it. Tommit pulled me forward with such force, that it took my breath away then he forced his foul lips upon mine. It took me a second to recover. I could hear Cassius fighting to free himself. I opened my mouth just enough that the ego-maniac actually thought his lips were moving mine . . .

I allowed him an infinitesimal second of enjoyment before I bit down hard on his lower lip. He jumped back and yelped in pain. Without thinking about it, he pulled his hand back and hit me with such force my ears were ringing. Then, he spat on the floor, his saliva was mixed with blood from the large cut that now oozed from his mouth.

"You would seriously rather be with this . . . *stable boy?* I could give you everything. You will still be my queen, the kingdom will demand it. I look forward to taming the wild out of you." My blood ran cold, knowing all too well what he was thinking.

“Leave her alone_” Cassius roared. It took all of the Destroyers strength to hold him in place. Tommit turned his attention from me back to Cassius. I didn’t want this to happen. He scooped up his sword and raised it to Cassius’ throat.

“He will make a nice addition to my trophy room. Maybe every time you see his pitiful head mounted for the world to see, you will realize just what I am capable of.” Tommit raised his arms, ready to end the love my life.

“NO_” Tears streamed down my face. Cassius eyes were locked on mine.

“I love you, Aurora. . . . forever.” This only enraged Tommit more. He growled and went to level the sword across Cassius’s throat.

Chapter 31

I have gone back to this moment a million times in my mind.

How could someone be filled with such evil? How could I survive without Cassius? I knew the first moment I was alone that I would find a way to end my life. Evver was missing; life without Cassius was too much to bear, especially if I was forced to live my life day in and day out with Tommit as my husband. I knew he would make me pay for my betrayal.

My heart had dropped to my stomach and my lungs had willingly stopped breathing then the impossible happened.

Chapter 32

The whole castle started to shake.

At first, I thought we were having an earthquake. Did they have earthquakes in Paradan? It shook Tommit with such force that his sword was sent flying across the throne room. There was a sudden appearance of hope starting to take root in my anguished heart. Cassius and I never took our gaze off of one another. If this was going to be the end, at least we were going to be together.

"WHAT IS GOING ON?" Tommit bellowed.

Everyone struggled to stay standing. I fought to free myself, willing myself to make it to Cassius. He had the same idea in mind. The guards were so bewildered by the shaking, they had weakened their grasp for a split second. It was all the time I needed to break free and run to Cassius. Seeing me running to him must have given him a surge of adrenaline; when I was only steps from him, he too, broke their hold and rushed to me. We clung to each other like our lives depended on it. Tommit had started to charge at

us just when the throne room doors exploded. The sound was deafening. Cassius used his body to shield me from the flying debris.

Was this more help for Tommit?

Or were we about to be saved?

I tried to see what was coming, but Cassius continued to hold me down to shield me from the unknown. I struggled, yet he was bound and determined to protect me.

"Just wait," his hushed whisper sounded. Frustrated, but obedient, I held still waiting for the reveal... *friend or foe?*

*

In rushed more than Cassius could count. Giants, fairies, dwarfs, trolls, and humans_ They were all being led by a royal figure on a black steed. Seated behind him was an older, but beautiful, woman.

Next to them was Tiden with a wide smile on his gentle face; Trix was flying nearby. Cassius felt a huge wave of relief. Help was here and they were on *OUR* side.

*

I could feel Cassius' muscles releasing their fierce protective hold on me.

This was a good thing. The only way Cassius would be relieved was as if our newcomers were on our side. Peeking out from under Cassius' arms, I could see hundreds of people. They came in every

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shape, size, and every type of mythical creature that I had grown to love. There were several of them already scooping up the guards and Tommit's monstrous Destroyers.

"Prince Calan_" Tommit snarled.

Cassius and I both looked at each other, surprised the Prince would show up to help us.

"Actually, it is King Calan, now. I don't believe I have had the *displeasure* of your acquaintance."

King Calan's words brought a sneer to Tommit's face. His jaw snapped shut in fury. "Trust me, I would remember meeting a *worm* like you."

Tommit lunged at King Calan.

Before he could even get close, he was swept up by Fara guards. He was immediately chained with no hope of escape. He fought against the chains holding him back. The sight of Tommit's fury had me cowering into Cassius' chest. He held me protectively. I noticed thru the entire interaction the woman behind King Calan never took her eyes from Cassius. *It was strange*. Cassius released one of his arms, but kept a tight hold of me with his remaining arm. He pulled me along, as he walked toward the waiting King. We bowed as we stepped in front of King Calan and his Calvary.

"Your majesty. We are so grateful for your help."

"Rise, son. We were so distressed when we heard what had become of our neighbors. Our new friends," he motioned toward Tiden and Trix, "had brought news of the atrocities that have befallen your

people. I am only sorry we were not informed sooner, we may have been able to prevent so many tragedies. We could have interceded sooner. State your name."

"I am Cassius, and this is Aurora."

His eyes rose at the reveal of our names. "Are you injured badly?" I looked to Cassius he had blood coming down his face. His eyes were locked on my cheek, where Tommit had hit me. I could feel it swelling already. I reached up to touch the side of my face and winced in pain.

"I'm sorry." His words were mingled with pain. I reached to wipe the blood from Cassius' gentle face. I was relieved to see the offending casualty was only from a small cut on his forehead. He leaned down and kissed my forehead.

"Why don't we let you two clean up and then we can talk. I will have my guards take Tommit to the Schelle caverns. I am willing to bet they will keep him out of trouble for a while." King Calan's words had the blood draining from Tommit's face at the mere mention of the caverns.

"Where?" I whispered.

Cassius answered. "The Schelle caverns, they are buried deep in the mountain that separate Fara and Paradan. The Dragons guard them. They are inescapable." Relief flooded my body.

"Thank you, We would appreciate that very much." We both bowed to the newly arriving king. As we turned our backs to them, Cassius escorted me to my room to change out of the tattered wedding gown.

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*

My emotions were on a roller coaster.

I was certain that I was going into shock. My nerves were raw. *Could it really be over?* It was too soon to tell. *Would King Calan be as good as he appeared?* Or would he be another wolf in sheep's clothing. I looked at the dozens of gowns hanging in my room. They had all been gifts from Tommit. I wanted to burn them. The sheer thought of them touching my skin again had caused my skin to crawl. Then, I remembered the clothes Cassius had given me. I dug them out of the back of my closet. They still smelled like the campfire, where we had melted our hearts together. I dressed quickly. As I put on my shirt, it had Cassius' familiar woody scent mixed in I loved so much. It relaxed me. I pulled out the crown out of my hair and the flowers which surrounded it. I wanted to try to take out all the braids but I also knew it would take me the rest of the day if I attempted to do this on my own. I didn't want to keep Cassius waiting any longer.

Whatever I was stepping into . . . whatever my future held I knew I was strong enough to deal with it; especially if I had Cassius and Evver by my side. The thought struck my heart the moment my mind said her name. *Evver*_ I still didn't know where she was. I rushed to the door. Cassius was leaning against the wall, his arms folded. The most peaceful look rested on his handsome features. He smiled when he saw me.

"You look unbelievably beautiful." His compliment had my cheeks warming and my mind distracted for a split second.

"Thank you, but we have more important matters. Evver's missing." My tone was frantic and he replied with a smile.

"Is she the reason why you were going along with marrying someone else?" he asked jokingly. I couldn't believe he wasn't taking me more seriously.

"Cassius. You have to know I would have never done it if I thought I had a choice."

"Good to know." He winked at me. He was making me mad.

"Evver?"

"She is safe. How do you think I found out about the wedding?" It took me a minute but when it hit me, relief flooded my entire body.

"She's . . . *safe*?"

"Yes. I sent her on an errand. It should take at least the rest of the day. I didn't want her anywhere near the castle until I knew it was safe. So, can we try again? *You look beautiful.*" His voice nearly melted my entire being. His eyes were blazing and my heart was on fire. Reaching out he pulled me toward him, until I was resting on his chest. I could feel his heated breath and it was making my skin tingle where it touched. I felt relief in a different way. He was safe. He was alive. I looked up into his eyes and could

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see the same desire I felt flowing through my heated blood. It was as if the rest of the world disappeared leaving us all alone.

My voice seemed too disconnected from the rest of me. So, I smiled. Cassius leaned down and gently brushed his lips against mine.

Chapter 33

I walked thru the castle, but this time was different.

The last time I had Drayben holding on to me. This time, I had the boy . . . I mean the man, whom I loved. He was more of a man than any man who I have ever known. The hallways seemed brighter, the walk seemed longer. We looked at each other before he opened the door that led us into the throne room. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I was once again pleasantly surprised. The throne room was empty, except for two people.

There was King Calan and the woman who still couldn't take her gaze from Cassius.

Cassius opened the door and motioned for me to enter first. I walked thru the doorway and stopped short. My nerves tingled. Cassius reached around my waist with one arm and guided me toward the awaiting royalty. With his free hand he entwined our fingers keeping a tight grip on me. As we made our way across the empty room, it felt strange. I didn't know what to expect.

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Would King Calan still be the good guy?

We reached them and Cassius bowed and I tried my best at a curtsy which was difficult with Cassius still holding on strong to me. My gaze touched the woman's as she smiled gently in our direction.

"Cassius, Aurora, I trust you are well?" The kings' words were touched with genuine worry.

"Yes. Thank you, sire." Cassius replied graciously.

"Please, let us sit." King Calan motioned to two large sofas in the corner of the room. "We have much to discuss." I felt weird being here in this conversation. After all Paradan wasn't my country.

We followed the king and the mystery woman.

"First things first I would like to introduce to you both my sister. This is Princess Aura." Finally a name, she was extremely beautiful but she looked anxious.

"Pleased, to meet you," Cassius stood and bowed. I tried to follow suit and her hands went up, stopping me.

"Please, don't." Her smile grew. "It's my honor to meet you both." Cassius sat down next to me and took my hands in his. He looked at me with the look of love, which melted my heart. He turned back to the king and the princess and he spoke.

"I must thank you. You saved our lives and the lives of many in our kingdom. I will be forever be grateful to you and the people of Fara." I nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly.

“Nonsense. Anyone would have done the same.” I knew this wasn’t true. “Now, we need to help stabilize Paradan. What can we do in order to aid you with that process?”

“I am unsure. If King Windom would have had an heir, then we would have someone to lead us thru this dark time. As it stands, I am at a loss of what to do.” I could see the pain in Cassius’ eyes.

“Windom’s son is the rightful heir.” Princess Aura’s words were quiet, but unmistakable.

“Windom has a son?” Cassius gasped. Her head nodded ever so slightly.

“But how could you know that?” Cassius question was on my lips as well.

“Because—you are *his* son, Cassius. *You are our son.*”

My heart stopped.

Chapter 34

Cassius was frozen in place.

The only reason he knew he wasn't dreaming was because he could feel the heat coming from Aurora's hands. She was squeezing his hand. He turned to look at her; tears were shining in her dazzling eyes. *How could this be? He was a prince, no scratch that he was King_ He was the son of not one, but two royal families. How could this even been possible?* He turned back to look at the anxious eyes who were waiting for his reaction.

"How can you be sure?" his voice shook.

"I wasn't sure if I would know when I saw you. I prayed you were still alive after hearing of all the atrocities Tommit committed. However, the moment I saw you I knew. I can see Windom's kind eyes, my mother's nose, and you have my coloring. The old saying is true *a mother knows.*"

Chapter 35

Tommit's hands were bound and bleeding. Thick ropes cut into his raw flesh. He was being dragged thru the kingdom he had ruled for the past four years. Now he was being treated like a rabid animal. Drayben was attached to him a single rope connected their waist's. The streets were lined with those he tortured. There were smiles of relief on their faces while some even danced in the street.

It only added to his fury.

His only thoughts were of revenge and of plans to end the stable boys' beating heart. He could hear Drayben was mumbling something under his breath. Tommit couldn't make out the words but he was certain his confidante's thoughts were close to his own.

"This is not the end." Tommit whispered sparking Drayben's attention.

"Sire?" it warmed him knowing he still thought of him as his king.

“I have a friend in the Schelle caverns. He will make a good ally. Perhaps with our brilliance we will find a way to . . .” A sinister smile lit his face. Even the pain of the ropes digging into his flesh couldn’t force the smile from his vile lips. Drayben smiled in agreement, ever grateful he was on Tommit’s good side.

*

Evver had been unsuccessful in locating her family.

She was frantic, while wondering if Cassius had made it in time to stop the wedding. She also feared what would happen if he had made it in time. *Would her brother be killed because of her warning?* The thought terrified her. More than anything she wanted to go back to the days when her parents were alive and well. To a time when they all lived under the same roof. The only change she would make would be to have Aurora there too. Sitting down on a purple toadstool, she drained one of the rulip flowers which were bloomed nearby.

They were a brilliant orange in color and shaped similar to a teacup. Its sweet nectar was sweet and refreshing. It regenerated itself, so she didn’t have to fear that others would miss out on the same delicious treat. Pulling out a wonnot from her pack she had filled at her family home, she took a large bite. A wonnot looked like a purple banana. They grew in the fairy forest. If she got hungry there would be more she could pick along her way. She looked at the tangy fruit in her hand and it hit her.

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Not far from the wishing tree there was a tree house, where her brothers and sisters used to play when they were younger. It belonged to an uncle Uncle Crement. He had fought with the first wave of the rebellion and lost his life. He had never married, nor had he had children of his own. He had been like a second father to them. Uncle Crement was a jolly fairy who loved everyone. It was a great loss to the fairies of Paradan when he had been killed. His death had rallied others to fight.

Most who followed his lead had met the same tragic fate.

Evver stretched her back muscles.

They were tight and sore. Her wings were hurting. She knew it was because she hadn't slept, but there was no time for sleep. So, she pulled on her pack and made her way to the tree house, praying it would be the last stop of her painful search.

*

It was silent. I didn't know what to do or say.

Cassius was a prince? It didn't really surprise me. The kindness he showed to all, his bravery. I knew he would make a wonderful king. His father *biological father* had been a beloved king. He had done all in his power for the people of Paradan to be healthy and happy. If there was anyone who could

undo what Tommit had destroyed— it was Cassius. I squeezed his hand trying to let him know I was here for him*that I believed in him.*

“Please, say something.” King Calan pleaded.

“Sorry, sire. It’s quite a shock, as you can understand.” Aura’s eyes were filled with tears. They matched mine. “It is a lot for me to take in.”

“I’m so sorry, Cassius. I was young and I felt like I had no choice. I realized it is an overwhelming revelation.” Aura’s words were controlled, but pained. Cassius turned to me, his gaze searching my face for a reaction.

“You were always a prince to me. Now, I guess its official.” My words caused the others to laugh. Cassius leaned forward and kissed my forehead. A relaxed smile touched his eyes.

“Just another reason I love her.” My face felt the familiar heat flooding my cheeks.

“Well, it sounds like we have much to celebrate. Paradan needs to crown their king and we need to celebrate a happy future with my nephew as my ally.” King Calan stood and offered his hand to Cassius. He stood and grasped his uncle’s hand. “Welcome to the family son.” King Calan pulled Cassius into a hug, while Aura and my eyes locked on one another. Smiling she stood and offered her open arms to me. I hugged her tightly.

“Welcome to the family Aurora.” Her kind words caused a deep warmth in my heart.

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"Thank you."

We all stepped back and surveyed each other. Unsure of what would come next. King Calan slapped Cassius on the back. "Well times a wasting. Why don't we go share the good news with your people?" I could see Cassius was still in shock but he nodded and his face took on a determined fire that I had seen in him before.

"Yes. There is much to do."

He turned back to me, "I will return soon my love." My heart felt like it couldn't contain the love that I felt for him. The fire in my chest burned strong, until it made its way down my arms and legs. I felt like I would self combust. Cassius followed King Calan out of the throne room, leaving me with Princess Aura. We stood in silence for a moment.

"I'm sure you have many questions."

"Too, many to count to be honest, but I realize Cassius needs to be the one to ask the questions first. I am thankful that you are here and the truth is out. Cassius will make a wonderful king. He will be just what Paradan needs to heal from the countless tragedies that have been inflicted on them from Tommit." She brushed my cheek. It hurt, even before she touched it. I could feel the continued throbbing in my head, as if it was the cadence drum in a marching band.

"And what about you dear?"

“Me?”

“Yes. How are you? Did he hurt you?” Her gaze swept over me. Aura’s tone reminded me of the way a mother would talk to her daughter. It touched me.

“I am fine. Please, don’t concern yourself with me. There are so many others needing help, so many who are still in hiding.” The thought of the numbers was overwhelming. “Paradan will need Fara’s assistance in caring for all the out placed. It will be worse than any natural disaster I have ever seen.” Her eyes widened at my words.

“You, my dear, will make a wonderful and caring queen. Caring about your people is the utmost priority for a compassionate king or queen.” I couldn’t help, it I laughed out loud.

“A queen? I’m sorry, but I will never be a queen.” My declaration surprised her.

“Why?” There were so many reasons; first I didn’t belong in Paradan. My home was in Oregon . . . wasn’t it? My life there seemed like another lifetime ago. “We will have to discuss it later. Now, why don’t we see to the staff? They will need to be prepared to feed many. As soon as word hits of how Tommit is gone and Cassius is the new king, I suspect the castle will be flooded.”

“Yes. Of course.” We made our way to the kitchen. I wondered if she had ever seen the inside of a kitchen. She seemed so prim and proper. I felt out of place walking next to her.

*

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Cassius walked behind King Calan.

It was a sign of respect for his neighboring king—and uncle. This was going to take some getting accustomed to. His mind was still reeling from the revelation that Princess Aura and King Windom were his birth parents. Life as he knew it had totally switched directions in the past few hours.

“Are you prepared for what awaits you son?” Cassius wasn’t sure how he felt about Calan calling him son. He knew it was a sign of affection but he just wasn’t there yet.

“It’s a bit daunting.” King Calan laughed deeply.

“Ah. . . . yes, it can be. My father, *your grandfather*, was ill for some time. All of my life I had been raised knowing what my life would become, the responsibilities awaiting me in my future. I would be willing to guess twenty minutes is far shorter than anyone would have liked to prepare you for yours. Cassius I am truly sorry things have happened this way they have. I wished Aura would have felt safe enough to tell me the truth years ago.” Cassius could see it was painful for him to talk about. His gaze became distant while he remembered the sorrow. “I would have given my life to make her happy. Today is the first time that I have seen her truly smile in years. The moment we walked in I saw a relief in her that I haven’t—” choking back the heavy emotion mixed with threatened tears. They walked in silence for several minutes before the quiet was broken.

“I understand. I will be the King that all of Paradan will be proud to have rule. As for the rest why don't we take it day by day?” Calan in agreement and stepped aside.

“I believe as king, it should be your honor to address the people first.”

A large lump formed in the back of his throat. Cassius took a deep breath; he wished that Aurora was by his side. She always soothed him.

*

I slipped into Evver's room.

Aura was busy giving the castle staff instructions about the upcoming celebration. She didn't even notice that how I slipped away. Several of the staff were already ripping apart Tommit's bedroom prepping it for Windom's heir. There was a spirit of joy in the castle that I had never experienced before. The staff was ecstatic Tommit was gone and a new king was taking over. For the first time in years, the staff was happy to do their assigned duties. I needed a moment to breathe. So much had happened.

My face hurt. I could still feel the rush of cold blood running down my throat. Moving my tongue around, I'd found the source of the gushing blood. A jagged cut was on the interior of my cheek. My head throbbed. My heart ached. So much had happened. Highs and lows threatened to consume me. I was tired of crying. But they started flowing without my permission. I buried my face deep in Evver's pillow. The floral scent reminded me of every moment we had shared.

I was grateful that she was safe.

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I only wished Fara had arrived sooner—in time to save Evver’s wings. While it was true I had felt out of place before. . . . I had grown comfortable in Paradan. There were people I loved here. People I would give my life for. While it was true most weren’t human, but they were the kindest most giving. . . . people I have ever known.

Where did I belong now?

Cassius was easy to love. The people of Paradan would be blessed with him as their leader. It was one thing to be forced to marry Tommit. The kingdom feared him. They would have accepted any queen he offered. *Cassius was different.* Not only was he going to be king, but he had *two* royal lines of blood flowing through his veins. Feelings of past insecurities crept back in my head. Taunts from my tormentors ran rampant in my heart and mind. My tears had dried, but I stayed buried under the pillow. More than anything I wanted to hide from the world. It amazed me how I could be fierce enough to challenge Tommit with a sharp sword in his hands. Yet here I was hiding like a child during a thunderstorm.

*

As he stepped out of the castle doors, Cassius was amazed at the amount of eyes which were glued to him. There were fairies, both flying and not, giants, dwarfs, trolls and humans of every size. Some wore the colors of Fara and some wore the colors of Paradan. But here there they were. intermixed together as if this was a daily occurrence.

There was no room for sadness today, as the only tears being shed were of—joy. Word had spread quickly— Tommit was gone. This alone was reason enough to celebrate. Cassius held up his hands to quiet the crowd.

“Thank you. We have great cause to rejoice today. King Calan and the wonderful people of Fara have relieved us of the monster who has taken so much from us all.” Murmuring was heard thru out the numerous crowds.

“It appears King Calan has done more than this wonderful miracle.” Cassius stepped back. King Calan stepped forward. He seemed more comfortable with the spotlight.

“It is a gift that I wish I could have given the people of Paradan years ago. A true heir has been found, King Windom’s has a son__” Gasps were heard, cries of joy were mingled with shouts of hooray__ King Calan raised his hand and the crowd quieted. “I feel blessed to be able to introduce you to King Windom’s son, my nephew, and the rightful heir to Paradan’s throne. I know there will be many who question this revelation, but like Paradan, Fara has had its share of pain. My beautiful sister, Princess Aura, gave birth to Windom’s son. It was just as the war began. She left him in Paradan, with a fairy family to care for him. She has been heartbroken all of these years. I am hoping the reunion of her and Windom’s son will be a step forward in the path of healing and forgiveness for both of our lands.” His news had

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stunned them all into complete silence. He wrapped his arm around Cassius' shoulder and then he pulled him forward.

"People of Paradan, my beloved Fara, let me introduce your new king, King Cassius."

Cassius wasn't sure what he'd expected. But the riotous roar of the crowd was painful. He fought against the urge to cover his ears. Tears of joy were being shed by all. He looked around at the people he would be charged to care for, lead and determine their futures. His shoulders felt heavy and his arms felt empty. Everyone was relishing the victory except him. It felt hollow, empty— even, not being able to share this with Aurora. He smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. King Calan must have realized that his mind wasn't fully there, so he held up his hands once again to quiet the gathering.

"Thank you, all. We have much to prepare. Please, spread the word to your friends and family.

Let them know they are safe and welcome to return to their homes. In two days time there will be a feast in celebration of the unification between Paradan and Fara." Another roar came from the assembly. King Calan hugged Cassius and then they waved to all who gathered.

They turned and retreated into the castle.

*

Evver tried the door, it was locked.

Knowing where the spare key was hidden, she started climbing the back side of a nearby tree.

Halfway up, an almost invisible knot was hidden on the side of a grouping of large snarled knots. Twisting it just right it popped open. Hidden deep within the crevice she found—nothing_

Evver's heart sunk. *How could it be missing?*

"EVVER_?_" She almost fell out of the tree when she heard the familiar scolding. She gripped the tree and she turned her gaze.

"Ember?" her voice was choked with emotion.

Ember flew up to get her. Holding out her arms Evver jumped like a lemur into her sisters awaiting arms. The tears she had been holding on to finally won the battle. She was flooded with relief—finally feeling the sense of safety that had long been robbed from her. Ember carried her into the now open tree house. Settling down on one of the open couches, she allowed her little sister the tears she knew she needed to release.

*

Cassius couldn't believe just how quickly Princess Aura had taken over. When they returned and entered the throne room she was busy dispatching the staff in every direction.

*

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King Calan smiled, thrilled to see his sister so alive. Light filled her eyes when she saw them approaching.

"Aura, I see you haven't been wasting your time." Calan had a twinkle in his eye, his tone half teasing. She flushed.

"Stop it, Calan. You know how much there is to do." She stopped her gaze, meeting Cassius'. "I hope, I didn't overstep."

*

"No. Thank you. It's overwhelming looking at all the tasks at hand. I appreciate any help I am lucky enough to receive." Relief flooded her gentle features. Cassius' eyes searched the room for Aurora. She was not in sight. "Where is Aurora?"

Confusion clouded her icy eyes. His question had her searching the room. "I'm . . . I'm sorry. She was with me. I don't know where she could have gone." Cassius' anxiety grew. A sinking sensation plummeted, deep along the recesses of his heart. He knew he was overreacting. They hadn't been gone long and Tommit was gone, hopefully forever, if he had his way. Drayben and Cronan had followed him to the Schelle caverns.

She was safe. It was fine. He continued to repeat this in his mind.

Forcing a smile and controlling the anxiety he felt rising. "It's fine. I'm sure she is nearby, if you would both, please, excuse me for a moment." Bowing slightly, he rushed out of the throne room.

*

"He loves her." Aura said simply.

King Calan laughed lightly. "Yes. Yes, I believe he does. I wouldn't be surprised if he aims to make her his queen." Aura's eyes widened.

"Are you certain?"

"Surely you are still able to see the looks of love and devotion in your son's face?" The words warmed her. *Her son.*

*

Cassius made his way to the kitchen. Perhaps Aurora was there. His mood changed when he stepped inside. Everyone struggled to bow or curtsy to their new king. This made him uncomfortable. Just yesterday, they had all laughed with him and shared a meal with him.

"Shia, have you seen Aurora?" The fairy's gaze didn't meet his.

"She was here earlier sire, but we haven't seen her for quite some time." He needed to find Aurora but he needed to deal with this first.

"Everyone please rise." They obeyed. "While it is true, I will be your king all of you are also my friends. Please, remember this. It will take all of us to rebuild Paradan. I am really hoping you will all be by

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my side as we tackle the immense task ahead of all of us. If you will excuse me," Cassius turned and left heading down the hallways.

*

"He is going to be a wonderful king." Shia's words brought nods of assent from around the kitchen. "Let's get back to our duties. We don't want to disappoint our king."

*

Evver had calmed enough to tell her sister what was happening at the castle. Ember had shoved food into Evver's tiny hands. The fierce look on her face, said it all—*eat*__

Evver ate while she watched Ember rushing around filling identical bags. She was mumbling to herself. It was apparent she was furious with the situation. While she was packing there was a scratching sound at the front door. She stopped suddenly frozen in midair. Grabbing the closest thing to her, a cast iron frying pan, she held it like a sword, poised as if she needed to be ready to bring down a dragon. Rushing down, she placed herself in front of Evver and whatever was coming.

"Don't move__" Ember's voice was ferocious. Her tense body stood rigid waiting for the door to open. The familiar voice from behind the front door caused her breath to stop.

Stumbling thru the front door, a goofy grin appeared. "Ember, were you cooking dinner already?"

Ember growled.

"I should have thrown this at you_ Seriously? Abow you scared me." She glowered at him and he started to laugh.

"I scared you? *You're* not scared of anything." He looked closer at her, the fire that still danced in her eyes, and the protective stance she held. "Ember, why did I scare you?" He could hear the sound of melodic giggling coming from behind her.

"Because of this imp." Ember stepped aside, revealing a still laughing Evver.

"Evver?" Joy flashed over his features and then was soon replaced with fear. Running over to his awaiting sisters, he started with an onslaught of questions. "Why are you here? Why did you leave the castle? It's too dangerous for you to be here." Ember was sick of the questions so she stretched her wings and flew over her brother's head. Then continued stuffing her bags with items she deemed necessary. Abow had Evver in a tight bear hug. Her feet struggled to free herself.

"We will explain everything on the way. Why don't you let go, before you squish her like a moncoe."

"Sorry," he said sheepishly. "I was, I mean, I AM so happy to see you little sister."

"Me too, big guy." Evver said resting her head against his leg. "Would you mind carrying me for a while? I have been running all night." Abow pulled open his shirt pocket.

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“Climb in and try to rest.” Using his large hand, he lifted her carefully in his awaiting pocket. She climbed in and before he was able to close it she was curled up and sleeping soundly. Relief flooded her senses, as she had done her duty and found help. Cassius and Aurora wouldn’t be alone in their fight.

Chapter 36

Cassius was growing more concerned.

He had searched for Aurora in all the places he could ponder. He had even made a visit to the stables. Darant had already heard the news and was thrilled for his friend. He offered to help in the search but Cassius assured him that he would be fine. Everywhere he went, the staff were cheering for him and bending over backwards to help.

Finally, deciding to use it to his advantage . . . he started sending them in search of his love. Cassius had each of them playing tag team. When they found another member of the staff they would enlist them to help also. It had been over two hours since anyone had seen her. He was trying to keep his cool, but he was getting more and more concerned. Questions pounded his mind with every step.

Where was she? Why would she run off and not tell anyone where she was going? Was she hurt? Had Tommit hurt her before he had arrived? He wished Evver was here. She might have an idea where she could be. In mid-step it hit him. *Evver.* He hadn't looked in her room yet. Cassius started running, sprinting in the direction of his little sister's room. Ignoring the questioning looks and calls he arrived and flung the door open.

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It was dark inside, since there were no windows to let the noonday light filter inside.

“Aurora?” His plea was rewarded with silence. Not willing to give up, he entered the darkened room. “Aurora, are you here?” Just when he was ready to turn and leave, he heard the soft sounds of breathing. It was quiet, but distinct. She had fallen asleep on him yest— *was it really yesterday?* So much had happened since then. While she slept, he had memorized her face, the long lines of her cheeks, the sweet sound of her breathing in and out was like heavenly choir singing just for him.

Using his hands to feel around the room, he found her feet first.

Relief flooded his every cell. He pulled her into his arms and in the process jolted her awake.

“What?” her words were jumbled and she seemed confused.

“Aurora, what are you doing here?”

*

The sound of Cassius’ voice reminded me of all of my fallen tears. The warmth of his strong arms threatens to pull me back over the cliff of insanity. *I have to stop this_* My feelings for the new king were impossible.

“Let go of me_” I push his arms away from me. Needing to put space between us, I tried to untangle myself from him. I hit the cold, marble floor violently.

“What’s wrong?” The pain in his voice weakens my determination for a moment. I right myself so that I am at least standing on my own two feet. Feeling like a punished child, so I decide to act like one.

“I want to go home_” I marched out of my no longer safe haven and headed who knows where. All I knew was that I had to leave. Not missing a step, Cassius was right behind me. We walked in silence. Only when we hit a dead end, of yet another unfamiliar corridor, he spoke.

“Where are we going?” his voice was soft, guarded.

“Home,” was all I could manage. He stopped me from retreating any further and he pulled me to him until our bodies become one. He held me so tightly. I could feel the irregular rhythm vibrating from his chest. Heated breath escaped his trembling lips. It sends the nerves along my neck into overdrive. Warmth flooded my body.

The warmth was quickly followed by pain.

Only this morning I had thought that spending my life with Tommit was a fate worse than death. Now, I knew it would have been easier. Loving Cassius and living my life without him, wherever it was, here or home, would be a daily torture. I could feel his lips touching my forehead. His lips moved down the contours of my face leaving a path of a smoldering fire. I tried to protest my body and mind, as they were in two separate places. My resolve was faltering, trying to fight back his lips found mine.

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The way they moved together it was like Novocain had been injected into the aching fissures in my heart. He pulled away he allowed me to catch my breath. His lips traveled down my throat the flames spread with his touch. I could feel his lips traveling down my collarbone. A tortured moan escaped my lips. If I didn't stop this now then I would always regret it. I moved my hands so they were firmly on his chest and with all the determination I could find, I pushed him away.

"Please. . . . stop." There was zero resolve in my quivering voice.

"Why. . . ." His eyes burned with desire. I felt my face flush by the way his gaze made my heart feel.

"This can't happen. You're the **KING**_ I don't even belong here." I could see the exact moment my words touched his heart. His gaze hardened and he reached out his hands gripping my shoulders.

"No, my future is with you." My heart swayed.

A noise came from the hallway. We both turned to see who was approaching. Rounding the corner were several of the castle guards. They were being led by someone I didn't recognize. They stopped when they saw us. The stranger approached us. He bowed to Cassius before speaking.

"Sire, King Calan needs you in the throne room, immediately."

Cassius looked back at me. His heart was torn; I could see it from the worry lines starting to surround his gentle lips and the fire still blazing from his hypnotic eyes.

“Go. We can talk later.” A promise I wondered if I could keep.

“I will see that the lady is returned to her room safely.” He finished his words with a gentle bow.

“And you are?” Cassius wasn’t about to let me go off with a complete stranger.

“Apologies, your majesty, my name is Areit. I am the chief guard for King Calan.” I was surprised he was a chief of anything. He couldn’t be more than a couple of years older than me. He wore his hair shorter than most of the men in Paradan. It was the color of wheat and had amber highlights. As if he had spent some time in the sun recently. While at first his eyes appeared to be brown, there were hints of gold wrapped thru out them. As if someone had woven it in. He stood less than a foot from Cassius; they were the same height as far as I could see. Rippling muscles threatened to burst from beneath his deep purple tunic. Black pants with black boots finished his clothing off. A large silver sword was strapped to his waist. Silver snap buttons held his shirt together. Charming dimples appeared when he smiled.

“Fine. But I expect you to keep track of my love.” Cassius words flooded my features leaving me feeling flushed.

“I *don’t* need a babysitter.” Annoyed at his implication, Areit suppressed a laugh.

Cassius leaned down and pressed his lips to my forehead, “I will return quickly.” I wanted to yell and to stomp my feet in protest. The other guards followed Cassius.

“I can find my way.” Just as I turned to leave when his hand stopped me.

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"My apologies my lady, but I have been given a task by the king and I must obey." I really wanted to growl at him but thought better of it.

"Fine_" I marched toward my room. When I was ready to open the door to my room his hand stopped me yet again.

"I believe you have been moved. Allow me to show you to your new room." His smirk infuriated me. I had never met someone so annoying. There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye. He laughed quietly. "Princess Aura thought you would be more comfortable in another room."

I turned to look to see if his gaze matched his softened tone.

There was suddenly a warm kindness radiating from his features softening my heart from my earlier negative feelings.

It was very kind of her, thank you." Areit smiled then began to lead me down the hall. I was certain I had seen every nook and cranny that the expansive castle had to offer. I was once again wrong. Areit led me down a bright corridor. There was a large sitting room on the right side of the dead end. On the left side there was a large set of double doors that were closed. He walked to the heavy looking door. Giving me a soft smile, he spoke.

"I hope you approve." With a fluid motion, one of the doors was open.

Chapter 37

Cassius took a deep breath before entering the throne room.

He didn't like being summoned. Aurora was struggling with the events of the past day. It was overwhelming for him as well. But he wasn't going to let his birth right or his new found family, get in the way of being with Aurora. King Calan was waiting in the center of the room.

He was deep in conversation with someone he didn't recognize. They were speaking in hushed tones. They stopped talking when the unknown troll saw Cassius enter the room. King Calan turned and motioned the troll away. Cassius got a strange sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. *Why was he called?* The tightening in his chest told him that he wasn't going to like the reason.

"Cassius. There is news."

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Chapter 38

Cassius made his way toward Aurora's room.

He felt nauseous. As king he should be celebrating. The news was huge. It would change things for Paradan and Fara forever. But it could also change things for the woman he loved. Waiting at the door to Aurora's room stood Areit.

"She's not here."

"*What?* I thought you were going to take her to her room? Where is she?" Areit held up his hands—to calm him.

"I was told to move her to another room. Your mother thought she would be more comfortable in the east wing. I can show you the way if you would like."

"No." He took a breath to calm his fury. "I know the way. Thank you."

*

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“She is lovely. A bit spirited, but I guess she has a reason for it, considering what she has been forced to endure over these past few weeks.” Areit’s focus had shifted. He was no longer looking at the king of Paradan, but a possible rival. King Calan had been like a big brother to him taking Areit, under his wing from as early as he could remember. Now it seemed that Calan had someone new to watch over. Areit couldn’t help himself from egging Cassius on.

*

Cassius didn’t like hearing that Areit thought Aurora was lovely. It bothered him deeply.

“Yes she has been thru much. Most would have not survived it.” Nodding to Areit he turned and made his way toward the east wing. Cassius thought about the fact that she had been brought from another land. She had told him she wanted to go home. Now there was the possibility he could grant her one wish. *Could he give her up so easily?* Her happiness had to come first even if it meant destroying his own. He sensed he was being followed as he made his way down the halls. Turning back, he could see Areit was only steps behind him.

“Is there something else?”

“I thought I would check on, Aurora. She seemed upset when I left her earlier.” Cassius felt his skin flush. He knew he shouldn’t be angry at him. But the fact he was able to sense Aurora’s mood so quickly had him feeling—*incensed*. It was his job to take care of Aurora and her feelings. Not someone

she had only met today. Remembering his position of king, he forced a smile and fought to control his tone.

“Thank you. But I am more than capable of taking care of her. You are—excused.” Areit’s eyebrow raised, he looked as if he was fighting a smirk.

“Yes, your *majesty*.” Areit bowed and headed the opposite direction.

Cassius quickened his pace. He needed to see Aurora. He would leave the choice up to her. He prayed that she would choose him . . . and their forever.

Chapter 39

I watched out the window.

The whole left side of the room was a full wall of windows. It looked over the gardens. Flowers of every color created a kaleidoscope of rainbows. It was truly breathtaking. The room was twice the size of my former room. I was mesmerized by several hummingbirds flitting around the garden dancing from one flower to the next. There were two of them and they seemed to be having a contest of which one could make it to the next flower the fastest. There was a gentle knock at my door.

"Come in."

Cassius entered with a reserved smile on his face. I had changed into a flowing red dress. It had a lace bodice surrounding my chest and led to a mock turtleneck. My arms were bare and the skirt flared from my waist. It had been waiting for me on my bed. I brushed out my hair, leaving it in gentle waves.

His eyes smoldered when he saw me.

"You look lovely." I felt the familiar warmth of heat flow thru my face and neck.

"Thank you." He walked over to stand near me. I had turned back to stare at the garden. He followed my lead. "I can't believe there are still so many flowers blooming here. At home, most have died off for the season."

*

Cassius wanted to postpone this moment forever. How he longed to just to have a few more moments with her before he revealed his news.

"Would you like to take a walk in the garden?" Her eyes lit up at his suggestion.

"Yes, I would love it."

"Let me grab your cape. There is a chill in the air." Her gaze lowered and her cheeks flushed crimson. The heat in her face warmed his heart. He walked over to the four poster bed. Hanging on one of the posts was a matching cape. It was made of a Wilit's fur. The softest fur in all the kingdoms, a Wilit was a cross between a tiger and a bear. Incredibly warm and velvety, it was perfect to keep her safe from the cold on an icy day. With one fluid motion the cape was off the bed and enveloped her pale skin.

*

My body felt flushed. I wasn't sure if it was from my new cape or from having Cassius' arms tighten around me, as he helped me put it on. Maybe we could make this work. After all, it has been said, "Love conquers all." *Could our love conquer everything, including myself doubt?* He walked around, to

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my side, and then offered me his arm. I wrapped my arm around his and felt as if it belonged there. He led me out of my room and over to the empty sitting room.

“When I was searching for Evver, I found this,” his eyes shone mischievously.

He moved a candle holder on the wall, and then suddenly a door appeared. It opened up to a spiral staircase, which led us right into the garden. As the door opened to the outside world my senses were assaulted by the fragrant blooms welcoming us. Walking thru the sea of rainbows of flowers, it was breathtaking. I was stunned by the most exquisite orange flowers. I had never seen anything like it. A mixture of a calo-lily and sunflowers it’s hue matched the ripest orange. And the scent was heavenly just like a orangesicle.

I was so caught up in the beauty of it all that I didn’t notice Cassius retreat from my side. Startled from my reverie, I felt the soft petals of a flower against my face. I turned toward it and could see Cassius. He had picked a rose the color of my dress. With the slighted bow he offered it to me. I took it and pulled it to my face, closing my eyes as I tried to memorize the scent.

When I opened my eyes, his face was only inches from mine. His eyes were on fire. His gaze erupted an inferno across the surface of my skin. He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. There are moments in life where if you could freeze it and live there forever you would. It would be like living in heaven, no pain—no pain and no problems just—*bliss*. This was one of those moments.

His lips touched mine and the world was gone only Cassius and I remained.

Chapter 40

Our moment was disturbed by shouts coming from the direction of the spiral staircase.

"King Cassius_ King Cassius_" I turned to see who had, once again stolen a perfect moment with Cassius from me. It was Areit. Of course it was_ I glowered at him. When he saw my face he covered his grin with his hand. I wanted to punch him in the face_

Cassius growled.

"What is it?" He asked annoyed. I could see by his expression that he was just as frustrated as I was about being interrupted, yet again.

"King Calan set me to inform you it's time. He has already left." *Time? For what?* Whatever it was had Cassius' entire body tensing up until it felt like I was holding on to a rock. Looking up at his face, it had turned into an unreadable mask.

It was scaring me.

“Already?” I thought I heard him curse under his breath. “Fine— we will follow them.” Gripping my hand so tightly, it began to throb from the lack of blood flow. He started pulling me toward the open staircase.

“Sire?” Areit called. Cassius swung us around violently. None of the events were making any sense. *Why was he so angry? Where were we going? Where was King Calan?* The only time I’d ever seen Cassius angry involved Tommit. *Did he escape? Was he coming back?* The thought terrified me. “I was asked to escort you.”

“I will be fine on my own.”

“As you wish but I could take Aurora . . .” he didn’t even finish getting the words out of his lips. Cassius let go of me and used both of his hands to push Areit back. For some reason he was prepared for it and stayed in place.

“I can take care of her_ She will be going with me_” I felt bad for Areit. Cassius was overreacting, at least in my opinion. Something was going on and I didn’t like it. Something had unhinged Cassius in the time since he had been called to talk to King Calan.

What could he have told him?

“Stop it_” I jumped between them. “What is wrong with the both of you?” They shared a knowing gaze which only frustrated me more.

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“Fine. If you insist on escorting me, it will be up to you to keep up.” A strange smile crossed Cassius’ lips. He led me thru the castle until we found our way to the stable. While Areit was saddling his horse Cassius smiled down at me. “Wait here a moment.” He leaned down and softly brushed my lips with his.

He rushed toward the back of the barn; I knew just where he was heading —Darant. No horse could keep up with him. I waited, wondering what twist my life was about to take this time. I was lost, deep in my thoughts, when I could feel a presence behind me.

“You looked far away.”

“I was. What is going on with you and Cassius?”

Areit laughed. “I think he doesn’t like me. Imagine?” I smiled.

“Where are we going?” He looked at me confused.

“He didn’t tell you?” I shook my head no.

“I wonder why? There is no reason to hide it from you.”

“He isn’t hiding anything from me. I’m sure he is going to tell me. In case you haven’t noticed he has been a little preoccupied.” He looked at me, standing there in my red dress, in a way that made my entire body flushed.

"I can understand being *distracted*." I looked around for Cassius, where was he? This moment was getting way to . . . intimate. The way his eyes were burned told me that I needed this conversation to end—*now*.

I heard the familiar sound of footsteps, or rather hoof steps. I turned to see Darant carrying Cassius on his back. I prayed he missed the last part of our conversation. I could see in his gaze he hadn't. He was glaring at Areit, and I was glad he was on my side. He reached down encouraging me to take his hand and I did so willingly. In a quick moment, I was seated in front of him and we were on our way out of the stable. I could hear Areit yelling in the background. Cassius buried his head in my hair and wrapped his arms around me tightly.

I should have been afraid, being up in the air, but fear was the last thought in my confused mind.

We flew passed the beautiful fairy forest and past the rising beanstalks and on into the blackened forest. We landed in a small clearing down a hillside. We sat in silence for a moment, before Cassius spoke.

"Aurora, I have news. I was going to tell you before, but Areit cut our time short." He leapt off the Pegasus and reached for me. Pulling me off with one swift motion, he pulled me close. The rapid motion took my breath from me. My heart was so loud, I wondered if he could hear it. Leaning down he touched my lips with his again. His touch, his scent, they made me dizzy. I was starting to forget why we were in

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this deserted part of the troll forest. I moved my hand along his shoulders, there was still tension there.

That was all the reminder I needed.

I pulled out of our embrace and I forced his gaze to meet mine.

"Why did you bring me here?" His face fell. I could see, whatever the reason, caused him great suffering. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer to my question.

"They found the well." He said it so simply, it was as if he was telling me it was raining. *The Well? As in the magical wishing well?* I felt like I was going to fall over. My head was spinning and I felt sick. I turned away from him. I couldn't face him now. *Was he taking me there to take me home? Did he want me gone?* My head sunk into my hands. I felt his arms wrap around my waist. "I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you but I was worried."

"Are you sending me home?" My voice was flat and no emotion was betrayed.

"NO_ I don't want you to go. Can't you see why I had such a difficult time telling you? I was terrified this was your answer. We only found two Para's. Each kingdom will be gifted one. If you want, I will use ours to wish you home." I could hear the pain in his voice. I turned to see if his eyes matched his voice. They were frozen and distant. As much as I had wanted to go home earlier today, the thought it could actually happen now had my blood running cold. I could never be so selfish as to take the one and only wish away from the people I had grown to love.

"No. Paradan needs the wish more than I do." A rush of relief cascaded across his features.

"Shall we go, then?" His hand offered me a promise of adventures to come and I accepted.

Chapter 41

Areit was fuming.

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He felt like Cassius had made him look like a fool in front of Aurora. He used the fire boiling in him to goad his horse faster. He didn't want to miss the show after all. It was strange to him how Cassius had not told Aurora about the wishing well. *Why would he want to hide this from her?* He was quickly approaching the troll forest and he couldn't wait to find his answers.

*

Arriving at the wishing well, I wasn't sure how I would feel.

After all, it was this well that had brought me into this land. Without it I would have never met Cassius or Evver. I was surprised to see a large amount of people standing in a circle around the well. Evver was there. When she saw us she squealed and ran toward us. I couldn't make it to her fast enough. I tripped over my dress several times. I was laughing and crying at the same time.

Many were staring at me but I didn't care.

Throwing my arms around her, I was busy checking to make sure not a hair was harmed on her petite head. Ironically, she was doing the same thing to me. I thought for sure Cassius would be stepping behind me, but he was nowhere in sight. When we both found our heads, we started looking for him. He was walking toward the wishing well. It looked like he was in a trance. I called his name and so did Evver, but there was no response. Evver and I rushed toward him.

"Cassius, what's wrong?" I pleaded.

“Don’t you see it?” I looked at the well and only felt pain.

“What are you talking about?” I looked to Evver and she looked as confused as I was. King Calan had made his way over to us and he was watching Cassius as well.

“You really don’t see it?” He asked dumbfounded. “It’s right there_” He pointed into midair above the entrance to the wishing well.

“What are you seeing?”

“It’s the missing Para_” Cassius walked toward the well and reached into the air. We saw nothing but when his hand returned he was holding a golden coin. Gasps were heard from around the circle. No one could believe what they had just witnessed. Cheers went out around the crowd.

All I could think was this simple gold coin could be my way home.

*

At Cassius’ insistence I was now holding the final golden coin in my hand.

King Calan and Cassius had both wished for the same thing, prosperity and peace for their kingdoms for a thousand years. Now, here I was standing in front of the well praying he would stop me. I looked around the circle of so many I have grown to love. I realized Paradan had become more of a home to me in a few short weeks than Oregon had ever been.

Looking into Cassius’ eyes I willed him to stop me.

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I couldn't believe I was about to leave them all. I willed the solid gold coin in my hand to disappear into thin air, so I would never have to make this . . . *impossible wish*. I stepped closer to the well. Looking down at the seemingly endless hole in the earth I braced myself. Closing my eyes, I held the coin close to my lips and whispered quietly to myself "I wish— to go home."

The coin dropped quickly out of my hand and into the darkness. It burned my fingers as it left them. I looked into eyes of the man I loved so dearly, afraid this was the last moment I would ever see them. I focused on him, trying to remember every inch of the love I would soon lose.

Golden smoke started swirling up out the well, coming out in small spirals at first, until the entire sky was shrouded in the golden fog.

It has been said "Be careful what you wish for, it just may come true." As much as I knew how true those words were, it would never stop me from wishing.

Prologue

Tommit's wrists were raw.

The blood had dried on his once, fine clothing. He was chained in a dirty hand dug cave. With every step the guards had dragged him toward the Schelle caves he was plotting his return. Kellet was a notorious criminal the kingdoms hadn't seen anyone close to him—until Tommit. All he had to do was wait, for the moment until he could speak to him. It would be easy to convince him to try to break free of their prison.

Cassius would die first, King Calan would be next. Tommit had other plans for Aurora . . . he smiled thinking of the fun he was going to have.

Acknowledgements-

The Wishing Well

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holly Zitting was born in the sunny red rocks of Southern Utah. After secretly writing since she was a young girl, her words were discovered by her teen daughter. She wanted more and her first novel, *The Amulet* was born. Holly began her fairy tale with her husband Grant 17 years ago and they have six beautiful children: Isabella, Jaxson, Sophia, Roman, Ava and Marina. She is a passionate foster mother and active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. When she is lucky enough to have free time she spends it camping near the Oregon beaches and enjoying her family and friends. Holly currently calls the beautiful wooded forests of Oregon home.

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