



# 1

*In a palatial, centuries-old villa in the heart of Fiora,  
capital city of the Serafin Empire*

*Twenty-five years ago*

**G**erard de Moireul was eight years old when his grandmother summoned him to witness his parents' execution.

He didn't realize, at first, why the servants were bothering to wake him at all. It had been weeks since he'd been left at his grandmother's villa, and in all that time, he had never met her nor been attended in his room by any of her household staff. After the first long day without any food, he'd finally found his own way to the kitchens, where a grim-faced older man had grudgingly served him a breakfast of plain, un-buttered toast and a small clay cup of well water.

Under the judgmental gazes of all the kitchen staff, Gerard hadn't dared ask for any more, no matter how loudly his stomach rumbled. From then onwards, though, he'd made a shamefaced pilgrimage to the kitchen twice a day, eating his meager portions as swiftly as possible and trying to ignore the way the room went deafeningly silent every time he entered. He'd spent the rest of his hours wandering the long marble galleries, all of them lined with impressive busts and statues but devoid of human life.

He couldn't even look out through the windows at passersby, as every single pane of glass in the villa had been covered and sealed by immovable black silk curtains before his arrival.

When hard, impatient hands shook his shoulder early one morning and harsh voices demanded that he wake, his first, desperate hope was that his parents were finally back from whatever urgent trip had taken them from him for the past two weeks. He didn't argue when he was presented with bright white, ruffled clothes, the sort that might be worn for one of his mother's famously luxuriant parties, where Imperial archdukes and the Emperor himself often mingled as guests with scandalous opera singers and heroic generals.

Curly hair tamed by a ruthless comb and unfamiliar clothes stiff against his skin, he scrambled thankfully into the grand carriage with curtained windows that waited inside the villa's sheltered outer courtyard . . .

And then stumbled to a halt as he took in the apparition who waited for him there. Dark eyes glittered with fury in her pale, stretched-thin face. Giant ruby clips studded her white hair, and even more jewelry flashed on every patch of skin exposed by her low-cut, celebratory gown.

"*This*," his grandmother hissed, "is the price of weakness and treason. Keep your eyes open, show no sorrow, and *learn it well*, or I will end this shameful family line forever."

Gerard might not yet know about the scandal that had swept

the continent for weeks—the bribes accepted, the secrets sold to enemies of the Empire, the soldiers' lives lost in consequence—but even at eight years old, he could sense the deadly truth in his grandmother's hissed warning.

So he kept his eyes open through everything that followed. As the Emperor's own personal executioner read out the list of treasonous crimes that had been committed, the crowd bayed with ravenous hunger and rage, and his parents were beheaded in front of him.

Under his grandmother's icy gaze, he didn't dare shed a single tear.

By the time he returned with her to his new home, Gerard thought his head and heart were both completely numb. Then, the next day, he was woken once again—this time, to be sent away to a military academy where every student and teacher knew exactly who he was and what his parents had done.

Perhaps his grandmother hoped that his classmates would fulfil her own deepest wishes, so he would not survive to shame the family in his turn. But Gerard had listened and learned his lesson well.

He would never forget it.

He was twenty-two years of age when he found himself unexpectedly in charge of a full battalion. All three of his commanding officers had been shot, and he and his men were left boxed within a valley with no options for retreat. However, Gerard had spent years studying military history and strategy in the dusty academy library that had been his refuge when he was younger. He could see exactly how to turn this seeming trap into a bottleneck for their opponents—and the astonishing, turnaround victory achieved under his command was the first step in an inexorable progression.

By the time he was twenty-five years old, court gossips and newspaper reporters alike were calling him the Empire's Golden Beacon. Breathless reports crossed the continent—both within

and without the collected archduchies of the Serafin Empire—with news of his unstoppable triumphs in battle, paeans to the shining, golden hair that (according to one influential poet) symbolically *lit his men's way to victory*, and his relentless, ascetic self-control in every aspect of his life. By twenty-six, he was a multi-awarded general; at thirty years of age, he became the youngest ever high general of the Serafin Empire. He was appointed to the post by Emperor Otto II, son of the very same emperor who had attended Gerard's mother's parties and then decreed her bloody execution.

Now, as the Imperial high priest serenely wafted an incense burner over Gerard's head to signify the pantheon's blessing upon him as the Empire's chief defender and sword of justice, Gerard breathed in the heady scent and gazed across the packed audience of clapping royals, aristocrats, military officers, and newspaper journalists.

No matter how desperately they tried, none of those gathered reporters or court gossips had ever managed to attach a single scandal to his name.

They never would.

His grandmother was no longer alive to witness the event, but he could still hear the last words she had uttered when he'd attended her final bedside ten years earlier.

"It's up to you now," she'd rasped, her dark eyes as fierce and as furious as ever despite the physical agony wracking her body. "You're all that's left of our family line. *Make it matter.*"

He fully intended to . . . no matter how provoking, dangerous, and unsettling the nemesis who had chosen to plant herself in his path, doing her reckless best to ruin everything.



*In the archducal palace in the Archduchy of Savelberg,  
at a celebratory ball*

*Seven years ago*

The first time Queen Lorelei of Balravia saw the Golden Beacon, it was across a glittering ballroom full of enemies.

Lorelei adored popping into her enemies' parties, and she never bothered to wait for an invitation. After all, there would be no fun in being a scandalous fae queen, sung and gossiped about nonstop, if she didn't make use of the fabulous portals at her fingertips to flout official borders and skip every invitation checker at the gates.

So she erupted into the ballroom in a shower of rainbow sparkles, wearing a gown of gauzy, shimmering scarlet chiffon and her most brilliant grin.

"My darlings!" she caroled as the string orchestra in the corner shrieked to a halt and every conversation broke off in shock. "We've finally arrived. Now the party can begin!"

Behind her, she could feel her favorite cousin's smirk even though she couldn't see it. "Let's hope the wine here is better than at the last Imperial party you dragged us to," Katrin drawled.

"It can't be worse," Lorelei's second lady-in-waiting retorted. "I'd drink sprites' spit before I tried that one again."

"Oh, Ilse, that doesn't count as an insult." Katrin sighed wearily, still not yet reconciled to the lady-in-waiting who'd joined Lorelei during Katrin's own time away, two years ago. "You drank sprites' spit for fun *both* of the last two times we visited the fae realm. No one believes that that's a burden for you anymore!"

"Hush, now." Lorelei beamed ferociously at the wide-eyed, staring mortals all around them and clasped her dimpled hands beneath her chin. "I'm quite certain our hosts have assembled a *fabulous* feast for such a momentous celebration. What *are* we all celebrating,

again? Oh, wait, now I remember." She tilted her head, letting her gloriously unbound blonde curls cascade over her gleaming, bare right shoulder. "You just won a little skirmish, didn't you? So impressive . . . especially when you consider that it was fought against a perfectly righteous group of dissidents in a *separate kingdom*, not even part of your empire to legally maintain." Her upper lip curled with a fury she couldn't quite hide.

As the ruler of one of the worryingly few kingdoms still clinging to independence on the fringes of their continent, she could not *believe* the stupidity of the neighboring king who had invited the Empire's help in settling his own internal issues. Had he paid no attention to the shifting tides of politics? The elderly current emperor, after his own early expansion, had been content to leave the Empire's borders where they were; his only son, soon to become Otto II, had far more dangerous aims in mind.

No independent kingdom would survive if they gave in to his schemes.

"Your Majesty." The Archduke of Savelberg was still hanging back, gaping like a particularly unattractive fish, but his wife was clearly a stronger soul. The Archduchess stalked forward now in her bustled and brocaded gown, stiff white lace framing her high neckline and her expression rigid with dislike as she swept a tight, reluctant curtsy. "How kind of you to honor us with your attendance."

"But of course. I knew you must have *intended* to invite me, even if you did somehow mislay my invitation." Lorelei smiled sweetly and felt every human guest around her cringe at the sight. "How could my ladies and I possibly stay away? In fact . . ." She clapped her hands together in theatrical delight. "Why don't we liven things up a bit with a party game? I seem to recall that, for some bizarre reason, your husband recently chose to expel every one of your fae citizens from Savelberg's borders . . . so why don't *we* make up for everything you've all been missing since then?"

Glancing over her shoulder, she sent a sparkling grin at her attendants. "Shall we, ladies?"

Katrin shrugged with the same easy grace that made her an excellent swordfighter. "It *would* make tonight more interesting . . ."

" . . . And I *have* been longing for another treat." Feral gold flashed in Ilse's green eyes, and her teeth sharpened in anticipation.

"Wait!" The Archduchess started forward, lifting one lace-bedecked arm as if she actually hoped to stop them.

She should have known better. Mere humans could never act as quickly as a powerful fae queen and her most trusted inner circle. It only took a single wrinkle of Lorelei's nose and two high, eerie whistles from her attendants before the familiar spell was cast and vibrant green vegetation surged up from the floor of the ballroom. Bejeweled guests started back with cries of raw fear as tall trees and giant, poisonous blooms erupted between them and their companions. Even more greenery fell in long, trailing loops of ivy and carnivorous blossoms from the crystal chandeliers, while tiny sprites shot through the room, darting in and out of elegantly piled hairstyles with gleeful, tangling mischief and sneaking stolen sips of aristocrats' champagne.

Shadows shifted and elongated in the corners, transforming into tall, spindly creatures made of branches and thorns, with drooping fingernails and sharp teeth that glistened wetly in the candlelight.

The wild, exhilarating scent of Faerie filled the air, and Lorelei smiled with perfect satisfaction.

"General de Moireul!" The Archduchess bleated the name like a prayer, spinning around and searching the vegetation-shielded crowd. Her voice rose above all the other panicked commotion in a screamed demand: "*General de Moireul!*"

. . . And there was the real reason Lorelei had chosen to grace this particular gathering with her presence. Her eyes narrowed as she prepared to finally meet the new enemy whose name had been popping up more and more often in worried whispers among the Empire's neighbors:

*The Golden Beacon.*

Ever since Lorelei had first claimed the throne of Balravia,

spiting her late father's wishes and all of her male cousins' hopes, new Imperial generals had been appointed again and again across the border, spilling like brainless salmon from the dreary military schools where would-be officers were sent from across all the Empire's archduchies. They generally seemed interchangeable to her—but there was something different about the way she'd heard this one discussed.

As Lorelei had learned since her own ascension, there was a magical point where songs and stories tipped into legend and took on a whole new power of their own, overwhelming every detail of the tedious truth with their own irresistible, infectious appeal. Right now, "the Golden Beacon" was still only a name. All too soon, though, it could become a symbol and a rallying cry that spoke doom to every kingdom still clinging to freedom . . .

Unless someone clever, strategic, and full of magic stepped in just in time to tarnish that golden gleam.

Lorelei's target stepped through the crowd of panicking aristocrats and greenery, and her smile deepened. Sylvana be praised, he looked like a mountain in a uniform! She couldn't kill this man without making him a martyr and inspiring a bloody war of retribution—but corrupting him for the sake of her kingdom? That might not be the chore she'd expected, after all, but a genuine *pleasure*.

"General de Moireul." The Archduchess sagged with relief as he joined her. "Thank the gods, you're here to save us all."

"I beg your pardon, Your Highness, but . . . from what, exactly, do you require rescue?" The man's voice was deliciously deep and rumbling. Still, as he turned from the Archduchess to look at her, Lorelei's chest tightened with sudden, instinctive warning.

Those wolf-like amber eyes were *far* too keen. They bored into her as if he could see all of her hidden secrets laid bare before him, through every layer of glamour and gossip that functioned as her shields—and his grave, unhurried question showed no hint of the alarm he should have felt.

"Well—but you can see—just look around you, man!" The

Archduchess flung out one sweeping arm to indicate the feral, fae wildness that had overwhelmed her ballroom.

Clasping his hands behind his back, the Golden Beacon nodded thoughtfully. "As I understand it, bringing a gift—such as this decoration—to any festivity is a point of courtesy for the fae. They *all* follow the laws of hospitality without fail. Having publicly announced herself as your guest, I am quite certain that Queen Lorelei would never allow any actual harm to come to you or any of your guests this evening."

Well . . . *fuck*. Lorelei's smile didn't lessen, but she purred her next words with sickly sweetness. "A soldier who's paid attention to his studies! How marvelously unusual." Sweeping forward, she closed one hand as far as she could around his absurdly over-large, muscular arm and fluttered her eyelashes at him. Colorful sparkles flew free at her command to dust possessively across his uniform coat and medals as she breathed in the pleasant combination of scents created by his soap, shaving cream, and sweat. "Your Highness, you must allow me to claim this man as my escort for tonight. I'm sure he'll keep *all* of us wonderfully safe."

"Oh, very well." The Archduchess snapped out her fan and wielded it before her flushed cheeks. "I hope you and your ladies will all enjoy your evening *as our guests!*"

"How could we not?" Lorelei watched, still smiling, as the Archduchess turned with a sharp flick of her fan and marched into the crowd to attempt a belated reconquest of her party.

Lorelei couldn't care less about that battle, nor about any of the aristocrats milling in a wide circle around her now, whispering excitedly and visibly debating the risks of swarming the infamous Fae Queen of Balravia while she stood within their midst.

She would leave Katrin and Ilse to find their own personal triumphs in that crowd. Tonight, she had a far more important battle to fight.

"So . . . the famous Golden Beacon." She tipped her head back to meet his amber eyes. The impact of that piercing gaze was just

as much a shock to her system this time as it had been moments before—but that was the effect of mere physical charisma, to which she'd learned bitter immunity years ago. "We meet at last."

"Your Majesty." He nodded respectfully, his features as impassive as if she weren't casting the delicious scent of just-opening roses from her skin. He should have been leaning closer to subtly breathe it in by now, even if he didn't want to shatter his dour affect by smiling—but he held his arm as stiffly within her clasp as if he were standing in a military parade. "Would you care to be escorted to the refreshments table?"

"Truly, I would *prefer* to dance with you." She leaned in confidently, adding the first breath of spring to her scent and allowing a gurgle of laughter to enter her voice, as if she were sharing secrets. "Perhaps I should have left a single open clearing in the ballroom, just big enough for the two of us to share."

"Alas, I do not dance." His features didn't even twitch. "However, I would be happy to introduce you to any number of fine dancers in attendance."

"No dancing at *all*? Ever?" She made a face, only half theatrically. "Don't you allow yourself a single pleasure, General?"

"I enjoy serving my empire."

Sylvana's tears! Was any man truly so dreary? She tilted her head, lowering her voice into a husky drawl as she trailed one finger across his uniformed sleeve and let her magic tingle through that barrier to tease against his skin. "Perhaps I could teach you a few new pleasures tonight."

"Your Majesty." He kept his voice too low for any onlookers to overhear, but his words dropped like heavy stones into the air between them. "You are far too intelligent to waste any more of your time."

"By spending it with you?" She blinked up at him with innocent, vacuous shock. "General, you must have heard at least *some* of the stories about me by now." If nothing else, the latest play based on her scandals was being performed to a sold-out theatre in this very city tonight. "How better could I possibly entertain myself than by con-

versing with such a delicious military man? Everyone knows I care for nothing but my own selfish pleasures.”

“Forgive me my bluntness,” he said quietly, “but I know nothing of the sort—and regardless of the reason why you’ve sought me out tonight, you will not lure me into any indiscretions that might lessen my position, tonight or ever.” His amber eyes held hers with implacable conviction. “I will never falter in my duty to the Empire, no matter what the provocation. You will *never* turn me from my path.”

*Oh, gods!* Sudden insight flashed through Lorelei, and she sucked breath in through her teeth.

No wonder he’d seen through her so clearly.

She’d come prepared for yet another mortal general swept through life by natural charisma, noble birth, and a reasonably muscular build. But in this man’s eyes, she glimpsed the inexorable flames of divine fire that fueled epic, world-shifting victories in his future. In his voice, she heard the unmistakable echo of a destiny being written by the gods of the Imperial pantheon themselves.

Lorelei released his arm as if it had burned her like the magic-repelling iron rails currently being planned by Imperial engineers to crisscross the vast Empire—part of the mortal world’s endless, vicious fight to extinguish the life and color from every corner of the continent. Meanwhile, the god of war and justice who stood at the head of the Imperial pantheon, Divine Jovar, smiled in benevolence upon His chosen few . . .

Including the man who loomed before her now, certain and protected in his god-touched path of conquest.

Unfortunately for him, Lorelei had her own divine sponsor—and more than enough personal stubbornness to move mountains.

“General de Moireul.” She swept a curtsy so deep, it went beyond respect into the deepest and most blatant public insolence. Then she smiled up at his beautiful, impenetrable face with all of her own goddess-blessed ferocity and brilliance for once unhidden . . . and she had the satisfaction of seeing his eyes flare wide in sudden, startled acknowledgement. “I hereby accept that challenge.”