



ONE

ETAN

It was never easy.

I couldn't imagine it was for any of us who were trapped within the confines of Mab's court. I could only be grateful that she'd determined my greatest use to her was remaining in the Summer Court I called home. So many of us weren't so lucky. So many of us were never gifted the opportunity to escape her violence and madness. Whereas I had only been present in Tar Mesa for a few days, others had been trapped here for decades—centuries even.

I had lost count of the number of Fae I had watched Mab torture over my centuries of life as Rheaghan's second-in-command. At some point, I'd become a hollow shell of the man I'd once been, strictly out of the need to survive. There was nothing I stood to gain by interfering in her games—nothing but the call of the final death and the freedom that would finally come with it.

There were people who counted on me, and I'd told myself that my silence served the greater good. My willingness to make hard

choices meant that the majority of my court could stay healthy and happy and as far away from Mab as possible.

So why did the sight of Mab torturing her own daughter nearly drive me to do the one thing I had never risked?

The Princess Maeve was a mess of bloody ribbons, her flesh torn open by Mab's shadows. She'd been so determined to find out what sort of magic her daughter had at her disposal that it was clear any hopes we'd had for their reunification had been entirely foolish. There had been the smallest glimmer of hope that the love for her daughter would have been enough to peek through the madness and tame the worst of Mab's impulses, but it seemed Maeve was just as subject to them as the rest of us.

For her part, Maeve had never revealed what her mother wanted. The Princess was already a beautiful woman, with fair skin as if it had never seen the light and hair as dark as night. She was striking, an unusual but ethereal beauty, with wide-set hazel eyes and full, pouty lips. She'd braided her hair away from her face on one side in tight twists, revealing a deep scar that slashed from her forehead to her cheek and bisected her eyebrow.

She looked the part of the warrior, and the defiance and determination she'd shown in refusing to display her magic to Mab only reinforced that—only made her all the more striking to behold. Her strength made me want to protect her, a completely unrealistic drive that made no sense for the woman I had never even spoken to. Something in her called to me—convinced me that she was used to standing alone.

Nobody should have to be alone.

I'd refrained from interfering by clenching my hands into fists at my sides—reminding myself that Rheaghan needed me and the cover my alleged allegiance to Mab provided.

She could barely walk by the time Mab was finished with her, attempting to draw out any source of magic and willing to use any means necessary to do so. The Queen of Air and Darkness's desperation to have a daughter who could be *used* was tangible in the air, her disappointment when nothing came driving her to the point of rage. It was as if the sudden presence of her child actively worsened her madness instead of alleviating it.

It did not help that Caldri's mate had proven to be far more interesting than Mab had anticipated when she'd first taken her days prior, displaying magic that should have been so far beyond her reach as a human mate. I'd heard whispers over the years I'd spent spying

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on all of Mab's faithful on Rheaghan's behalf, the hushed murmurs spoken in shadows in an attempt to keep Mab from knowing of the second child that had been taken from Alfheimr and tucked out of reach in Nothrek with the Veil to protect her.

I couldn't say for sure if those whispers had ever reached her ears or if she remained entirely oblivious. The information wasn't typically filed away as something critical to run to her with, given the rumorous nature of it at its core. To present information to Mab that proved to be false would draw unwanted attention to the messenger, and being caught in Mab's crosshairs was not a position many wanted to risk. Many chose to take the odds of her never discovering their knowledge of the rumor if it came to fruition, but there was no winning in any situation where Mab was involved.

There were very few of us who thought we could play games with her and come out alive on the other side. In spite of all of Rheaghan's warnings, I couldn't help but enjoy the calm, manipulative whispers that I murmured in the Queen's ears to try to gain luxuries and freedoms for the people of the Summer Court that they might not have had if it hadn't been for my interference.

She was just as likely to punish them in her attempt to harm her brother as she was to reward them for their loyalty to her.

Rheaghan cleared his throat, forcing me to snap out of the trance where I'd been staring at the Princess and lost in thought. "Don't even think about it," the King of the Summer Court said, and I turned my stare away from the breathtaking woman, who I realized, with a shock of discomfort, was his niece.

Oops.

I laughed, brushing my hand over the back of my neck as I searched for the words to argue that what she did, as a fully grown woman, was none of his business. Even for the Fae, who were more open in the lines of taboo and what relationships were forbidden, ogling your best friend's niece was a little suspect.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," I said, shrugging my shoulders to feign casualness about the situation. Even if he didn't want to think about it, which would have been even stranger than normal considering he had never met the woman before, he would find himself in the uncomfortable position of men admiring her.

"Don't give me that bullshit. Getting involved with Mab's daughter would be the very definition of stupid. That's not even touching on the awkwardness of me being obligated to beat your ass if you touch my niece," Rheaghan said, arching a brow at me.

"Maybe, but I've never claimed to be smart," I said, grinning through the words as the King of the Summer Court hung his head forward and pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation.

"I would like to see you survive long enough to return home at the end of the Tithe. Call me selfish," he snarked, but he knew as well as I did that the damage was done. Like so many others of our kind, particularly those from the Summer Court, where blood ran as hot as the desert plains that surrounded our seaside homes, I was not easily deterred from something after I set my mind to it, and I wanted to *know* Princess Maeve.

Intimately.

The Princess stumbled her way down the aisle of the throne room, making her way to the doors at the back as Devorin trailed behind her. The gown they'd put her in before returning her to the throne room was too long in the back, trailing behind her in a sea of black that matched her hair.

Mab's propensity for pomp and circumstance meant that I was used to seeing women in the finery that she demanded, gowns being the most common attire in Tar Mesa, but there was something about the way Maeve moved that signaled a discomfort with the garment.

Wherever she'd lived, whatever life she'd come from, she wasn't used to the feeling of a dress playing around at her ankles or the heeled shoes they'd put on her feet.

I stepped forward from the shadows when she tripped on the dress, catching her by her forearms and keeping her from falling. Her blood slicked my hands, coating my palms in the places where Mab had bled her in an attempt to draw out her magic.

She paused for a moment, letting me support her in what I knew was the first deep breath she'd taken since entering that throne room and facing down the woman she had probably come to dread meeting, despite their blood relation. When she finally raised her chin to meet my stare, something hard glittered behind her hazel eyes that reminded me of molten steel, of heat and flame that burned so hot it could destroy all that remained of the world that had been ravaged by Mab's cruelty.

I held her still, my mouth dropping open as we lingered for a moment, tuning out the noise and commotion of Mab's court around us.

"Princess Maeve," I said finally, bowing my head forward in the sign of respect her mother would expect from me. Her jaw hardened to match her eyes, her nostrils flaring with annoyance.

"My. Name. Is. Fallon," she snapped, the ire in her voice tipping

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the corners of my mouth up into a smile. Many would have broken under Mab's torturous hands, would have caved and given her anything she wanted, but this woman clung to all traces of her identity and rebelled against the control the Queen of Air and Darkness would try to exert over her life.

Immediately, I knew Rheaghan and I needed to do whatever it took to free her from Tar Mesa and the direct influence of Mab in her daily life as quickly as possible. That rebellious spirit would be her downfall if she didn't find the balance to prove herself useful to Mab. If Rheaghan and I left her here, we'd be condemning her to death.

It may not happen the next day, or even the week after, but eventually that spirit would be crushed beneath Mab's fist until death became a mercy. Rheaghan and Mab's mother had practically raised me. Her memory deserved better than watching her lineage die.

"Fallon," I whispered as I turned to nod at her mother where she watched our interaction, offering Fallon my arm as I took my place beside her. She accepted it, even though it seemed like she may not, allowing me to lend my support as she gathered her dress in her free hand and tugged, tearing the fabric at her knees and tossing it to the side with a glare for Mab.

I withheld my chuckle and my grin, impressing both Rheaghan and myself when he wasn't able to stop the hoarse snort that he attempted to cover with his hand. She let me guide her forward, putting distance between us and the Queen, who would undoubtedly be angry at the torn gown.

As if it weren't already ruined by her daughter's blood.

Malachi, the sadistic bastard, took her other arm the moment we were out of Mab's sight, guiding her away from me and toward the hall that would lead to the stairs and up to the rooms Mab had chosen for her. I watched her go as Rheaghan came up beside me, his hands stuffed into his trouser pockets.

She took a few steps with Malachi's assistance, his attention to her struggle reassuring me ever so slightly. He would keep her as safe as he could, from any threat outside of his precious Queen, because Fallon was the lost Princess that all of Tar Mesa had wished would return for the centuries since she'd disappeared in the night. But I didn't know that the worship they had for her would last, now that we'd been faced with the reality that Mab cared very little for the woman we'd all hoped would tame her by giving her someone to love.

She stopped halfway up the steps, turning to meet my stare over

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her shoulder for the briefest of moments. It was all I needed to reassure me that my intentions for her would be met with returned interest.

She felt that pull, that inexplicable attraction that had consumed me from the moment I saw her. It made no sense given the reality that I had yet to feel the pull of my mate, even after the fall of the Veil.

Condemned to live alone for centuries, I was tired of waiting endlessly for a woman who may never come.

For one who might have died her final, true death before the Veil came down, leaving me to rot in madness for the rest of eternity until Rheaghan or someone else I loved had to put me down as a mercy.

No, I was done fucking waiting for my mate.

I'd claim a wife instead.