



ENSORCELLED

BOOK THREE IN THE CHRONICLES OF LUCITOPIA

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Title Page

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For my sister Martha

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I could argue that I was tricked, or blame it all on my parents, but I know that I'm the one responsible for turning my life into a total turdburger. I did it to myself. Asked for it. *Begged* for it, even, though I would have begged for anything as long as it got me away from my situation back home.

But now here I am, about to die slowly and painfully when I should be developing an app, or building up a following on TikTok with my sea shanties.

But who am I kidding? Every app on the planet has already been developed, and my singing is mediocre at best. Social media gives me panic attacks anyways, which is part of the reason I jumped at the chance to come to Lucitopia. I figured any world without Twitter is probably a nicer one than mine, but that's not how it worked out at all. Lucitopia is not nicer, especially not when you are the apprentice to Asphodel, the Evil Sorcerer.

When I said the spell and became a part of one of the many stories that make up the *Chronicles of Lucitopia* I had sorcery in mind, certainly. I've always been one of those dorks who would rather read about twelfth-level mages in some made up world than play sports in mine. It's not that I'm not athletic... well, yeah, it is. I wasn't an athlete in high school, but that's because I've never been into team sports. Mostly because the type of bastards who live for team sports teased me for being fat when I was a kid. I'm not fat anymore and I honestly enjoy working out, though I'm not interested in being brawny or bronzed. If I was, I would have said one of

the spells that would have turned me into a character like Torvold the Bold, or the Dragon King.

Don't get me wrong, I love those characters, and sword fighting is cool—in a geeky way, of course. I've been practicing I since I got here because, apart from being a more urgent necessity than toilet paper in this world, I've discovered that swordsmanship is also fun. But being a knight is not, nor was it ever, my dream.

My dream was to do magic. Not illusion, like most of the stuff that passes for magic here in Lucitopia, but *real* magic, and I ended up with Asphodel for a master—who, by the way, is a genuine psycho. He literally murders people for breakfast. Well, not people per-say, as he is quick to point out. Magical creatures. He drains magical creatures of their magic until they're dead so he can cast real spells that change the world, and don't just create an illusion. Draining magical creatures is the only way a human can perform real magic without half killing themselves. By the way, I didn't find out that little tidbit of info until after I got here. I'd read the compilation of individual tales that make up the highly unreliable, and oft misquoted tome known as *The Chronicles of Lucitopia* many times, but when I actually went *into* the book, I found that all the stories I thought I knew so well, were no longer in my head.

That's the trick of it, see? Lucitopia becomes a surprise to anyone who manages to enter it. Overconfident ding-dongs like me think we have it all figured out, like we can game the shit out this place, but when we get here, the details get hazy. Once I got to Lucitopia it was like trying to remember the words to a song I hadn't heard since I was a little kid. Everything here felt familiar—burned into my mind, even—but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get any of the lyrics right because I never learned them properly. For example, no matter how well you remember it this way, Elton John never actually sang the words, “hold me closer *Tony Danza*.” Picture that mind screw but scaled up to an entire world.

When I said the spell and came here, I thought I knew what I was getting into, but all I remember clearly are the terms of my agreement for being in Lucitopia. Firstly, I know that I have only one year to become the mage I've always dreamed of being and defeat Asphodel in a wizard's duel, or I die. A year, by the way, that is up in two weeks. Secondly, I cannot

disclose to anyone in Lucitopia that they are, in fact, fictional characters in a book, or else I will be trapped in Lucitopia forever. And, finally...

...crap. I can't remember what the last of the three conditions was. That's bound to be problematic.

But back to my grievances. It wasn't until I was trapped here and bound by oath to serve Asphodel that I became aware of the fact that I'd have to be a serial killer to do real magic. As I'm not the blood-thirsty type, there goes my effing dream. God, I hate this place.

Still, I knew that everyone who comes to Lucitopia finds it to be different from what they read in the *Chronicles*, so I can't claim I wasn't warned. But I'm not really up for a debate about the fine print underneath my signature for my sold soul right about now, because honestly? All the blood that should be in the lower half of my body is currently in my head, seeing as how I'm shackled to a dungeon wall, hanging upside down by my frigging ankles.

On that note, why do so many people, me included, romanticize this sword and sorcery malarkey? I have yet to read a fantasy novel that *didn't* have someone hanging from their ankles in it, and way worse. Right now, I'm staring at an ogre who's crammed inside an iron maiden. I can see him clearly because Asphodel has cast a spell on it, making the front of the iron maiden translucent. Almost like it's made of plexiglass, except there's some sparkle around it. Asphodel likes to see his torture in action.

I used to watch a lot of movies where someone got locked in a sorcerer's dungeon and I thought it was badass, but it's not. It's terrifying, painful, and highly unsanitary. There are, literally, zero bathrooms in a dungeon. I'm itchy, so I'm sure I have scabies or ringworm or something equally skeevy, and the ogre I'm staring at has turned a livid shade of pink. Pink is a great color for a human of the Caucasian persuasion like me, but it is decidedly unhealthy for an ogre who in the full flush of vigor is a putrid shade of green.

"Scrawny human," the ogre moans.

His voice is quite strained because, you know—torture—so I can't tell if he's calling out to me or making fun of me.

"Human. You dead?"

"Ah, no?" I reply with the same amount of certainly I feel at the moment.

“Must. Get me out. Of here,” he grunts through labored breaths.

“You mean me? Get *you* out?” I guffaw, which is a terrible idea because my head is just pounding. I gesture to my inverted and woefully shackled self. “How do you figure I do that?”

“You useless,” he groans. “Asphodel. Not kill you. You free soon. Must save me.”

I take offense at the useless comment, but the ogre does have a point. All the usual inhabitants of Asphodel’s dungeon belong to one of the many magical breeds in Lucitopia, as they are what he proverbially eats for breakfast, while I am just a useless human, incapable of being drained to death for my magic because I have none. Which was the whole reason for me coming to Lucitopia in the first place. Stupid stupid-head that I am. I’d come up with a better insult for myself, but I think my brain cells are dying off as they drown in my pooling blood.

“Even if Asphodel does eventually free me, which he probably won’t, what makes you think I wouldn’t run as far away from this place as I can as soon as he does?”

“You. His. Apprentice. You *stuck* with him.”

He’s got me there, which is surprising. Most ogres seem barely clever enough to do up their boot laces. “How did you know I was his apprentice?”

“Only other human here,” the ogre replies simply. I think he’s smirking at me. Well, as best he can, considering there is a spike just beneath one of his eyeballs.

I suppose humans are a little thin on the ground at the Ebon Spire. Still, this must be one intelligent ogre to put that together.

“If I am Asphodel’s apprentice, why would I save you?” I ask.

The whole reason I’m in here to begin with is because I questioned my master about maybe, possibly, not torturing and killing magical creatures despite the fact that I knew it pissed him off. Couldn’t help it. He was about to drain a baby fairy of its magic. I mean, come on. *A baby fairy*. It was crawling across the black flagstones in front of Asphodel’s smoked quartz throne making goo-goo noises and fluttering its iridescent wings pathetically. What kind of ghoulish creature would you have to be to keep your mouth shut? Baby fairies are one thing, but sticking my neck out to save a full-grown ogre? Meh.

“Must help me,” the ogre pleads. “I can stop Asphodel before he—” the ogre stops abruptly, and we hear the creaking sound of the rusty bolt of the dungeon door being turned.

Asphodel the Evil Sorcerer comes breezing into the dungeon that he probably constructed right out of the playbook for soul crushing medieval squalor, looking every bit the gorgeous douchebag that he is.

Seriously, this guy is irritatingly good looking. He’s built like a brick shithouse, has a face that any Renaissance master would have begged to chisel, and he’s got the most incredible voice. I know having a great voice doesn’t sound like a big deal, but it’s the thing about him that gets to me the most. Doing magic isn’t just repeating the words to a spell correctly. It’s about saying a spell in a way that seduces power out of thin air. And how do you do that? You have a voice that makes peoples’ spines tingle, that’s how. Put all that into a guy who moves like a leather-clad rock star through a sweaty nightclub and you have the asshole that I’m looking at right now.

Even if he wasn’t a psycho, and I wasn’t contractually bound to defeat him in a wizard’s duel in order to complete my quest and get the F out of here, I’d still want to kill him. But I can’t because, apparently, he’s immortal. Which is another tidbit of information that was kept from me when I signed over my life to Lucitopia. *God*, I hate this place.

“Well, Ramsay,” Asphodel the Evil Sorcerer says on a sigh, “have you rethought your position?”

Ramsay is my last name. My first name just doesn’t have the right ring to it in Lucitopia. No one is going to write any ballads about the All Powerful and Beneficent Doug. Still, Asphodel has a way of saying my perfectly respectable last name as if it were an even more vulgar synonym for dipshit.

“Yes,” I say, trying hard not to be too sarcastic, though my current “position” is upside-down. “I believe I have, master. In fact, I would say I have a whole new perspective on life in general.”

Half of Asphodel’s face ticks up in a smile. “Do you?” he purrs. “Please explain.”

“Well, I think that my life is very important to me. More important, than say, other people’s lives.”

“People’s?” he repeats, crossing his arms over his chest and frowning.

“By that I meant *lowly* people! Not people-people like you and me, but ignorant folk! I wasn’t even including creatures like that fairy baby, of course. Fairy babies are like flies. They should be swatted!” I ho-ho-ho a hearty laugh that is definitely not fooling him.

There’s no way to feign racism to a racist. They can smell your lack of hatred and complete inability to classify others as inferior.

“Ramsay, I’m disappointed in you,” he says as he shakes his head and turns away.

I turn my hands up in resignation. (Well, down, considering my angle.) “Yes. I know, master.”

“I really thought you were making progress as a sorcerer.”

“Mage,” I whisper under my breath, but quietly so he doesn’t hear. I want to be a *mage*. Sorcerers are dicks.

He stops and turns back to me when he gets to the door, continuing, “But you will never progress until you learn that great magic is about...”

“Balance,” I say with him.

“Exactly.”

Asphodel has this insane theory that by removing magical creatures from Lucitopia he is restoring balance. I guess whatever lets you sleep at night, right?

“I’m sorry, master,” I say, actually starting to feel bad about the fact that I can’t murder innocent creatures. Asphodel has a way of making you want to please him even though you know he’s evil.

He looks me over with a sad smile. “I really have high hopes for you. I think you could be one of the great sorcerers of our age. But if you disappoint me again, I will have to kill you.”

“Yes, I know master. I will try harder, master.”

I’ve been trying harder for nearly a year, scouring every moldy scroll written in even half-legible runes for any way to defeat Asphodel, and I am no closer to that goal than I was when I first arrived in Lucitopia. As it stands, getting into a wizard’s duel with him would be like me getting into a rap battle with, well, anyone. I can’t rap.

“Do that,” he urges—dare I say gently? And then, before he leaves, he comes back to the contraption that has me hoisted in the air. He pushes a lever, and a winch lowers me to the ground.

There are these fleeting times when Asphodel seems entirely human and not a soulless demon shat from the bowels of hell. It's disturbing, actually, because if there is goodness inside him, as I suspect there is, it makes the things he does all the more monstrous.

I crawl away from the wall on my forearms, through the rushes strewn across the flagstones, dragging my useless legs behind me. As soon as I can sit up, I start rubbing the blood back into them. For the moment I can't feel my feet, which is a good thing. The shackles around my ankles have cut into the skin and I'm bleeding badly. Lucitopia may not be real, but the pain is. And so is the dying. If I die here, I really die.

"You will stay here for two more days. No food. No water," Asphodel declares.

I nod, looking down at my ankles. "Yes, master," I whisper as he leaves the dungeon.

The silence lasts only a heartbeat before the ogre starts in again.

"Ramsay," he calls out pleadingly. I hold up a hand.

"Don't," I tell him. I look away from my shredded ankles and meet his eyes, which I discover are a sparkling, sapphire blue. I was not expecting that. I was expecting...well, nothing, really. Just not blue. "Look, I'm sorry you're where you are, but I'm not that much better off. I can't help you. I can't even help myself."

The ogre shrugs. I wish he wouldn't because more green blood starts to flow from one of his many holes.

"I see that now," he says, smiling though a grimace.

"What's your name?" I ask, though I know I shouldn't fraternize with the cannon fodder.

"Fitspur," he replies.

"Nice to meet you," I mumble.

"And you, Ramsay," he says.

He tries to shift his position to face me, but spikes prevent him. I can only imagine what he's going through. I heave a sigh because—I know I'm an idiot—but I can't take it anymore. I spent too long learning how to save lives to let someone die in front of me.

"You know, it's impossible to have a conversation with you like this," I say. I crawl to his door and push the pin out of the hasp that has him locked inside the iron maiden. Then, I think twice.

“Do you really want me to open it?” I ask doubtfully.

“Yes,” he replies. I believe I detect a hint of sarcasm, which is odd because ogres are usually extremely literal.

“But, think it through,” I continue, certain he hasn’t. “As soon as I pull this door open, all the spikes will come out of you. Once they are out...”

“...I’ll start bleeding. Profusely,” he finishes for me through labored breaths. “Don’t worry. Ogres heal quickly.”

I’m still a little stunned by his use of the word *profusely*. Quite sure I’ve never heard an ogre use a word with more than two syllables in it before.

“It’s going to hurt,” I inform him.

“I know.”

“Okay,” I say. “Shall we do it on three?”

I see his jaw tighten and his breathing increase. “On three,” he agrees.

He’s tensing up. He shouldn’t tense up. “You need to relax,” I tell him. “If you aren’t relaxed...”

“Just get...me out,” he interrupts.

“Okay,” I say in a placating tone. I look up at him bracingly and start the countdown. “One—” I say, and I yank door open, just like Mad Max in *Beyond Thunderdome*.

Fitspur makes a wheezing, creaking noise as he tumbles out of the iron maiden. He does not ask me *what happened to two*, like in the movie. Instead, he rolls around on the ground, wincing and trying to clasp the parts of him that are fountaining blood. I try to help, but I’m at the end of my chain and all I can do is tap at him ineffectually as he rolls past, until he finally settles down. The bleeding stops in a few moments after that.

“You’re a bastard,” he groans, holding onto a large hole under his ribs as he pushes himself up to sitting.

I don’t know if it has punctured any major organs because I’m not sure where the major organs are for an ogre. I tear off a bit of my shredded tunic and press it against the hole that is bleeding the most. I help steady him until he’s resting against the frame of his torture device.

He takes a few deep breaths, which I imagine were in short supply inside the iron maiden, and I see a few of his smaller holes close. The larger ones remain open, but they shrink considerably. He really does heal fast.

“You’ll have to put me back in there before Asphodel returns in two days,” he replies tiredly.

“I can’t do that.” I crawl over to my wall and lean against it, facing Fitspur. “And anyway, what’s the point? Asphodel is sure to find out, and then I’m a dead man.”

“No,” he insists. “You must live and release me. For you to stay alive, you must put me back in.”

I grimace at him. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Very.”

To be honest, I don’t know if I have the stomach for that. Or the strength. Shutting a body inside an iron maiden isn’t like closing a door. I’d have to push all those spikes into him, and he’s an ogre. They have much tougher hides than humans do. I’d have to bear down on the door and push through that hide, all that bulging muscle, all the while scraping across bone and tendon. I’ve seen a lot of blood and guts in my life, but my aim was to learn how to help those who were injured, not do the injuring. It’s just not in my wheelhouse.

“What’s so important that you’re willing to go back in there?” I ask, gesturing to the iron maiden. “And don’t tell me it’s better than dying, because it’s not.”

Fitspur regards me shrewdly, as if deciding whether he should tell me. Presently he confides, “I know how to kill Asphodel.”

“Right,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Pull the other one.” I love being able to quote *Monty Python* without anyone here getting it.

“No, it’s true. I know how to kill him.”

Poor thing. Blood is apparently not the only thing he’s lost. “I’ve been following him around for a year, searching for a way to kill him, and I can tell you right now, it doesn’t exist,” I inform him. “Nothing can kill Asphodel. He’s immortal.”

Fitspur shakes his head. “He’s not immortal. He just cannot be killed by *anything of this world.*”

My eyes widen and I freeze. Does Fitspur know that there is another world, and therefore that Lucitopia is a story? I must be careful here because if I give that truth away, even unintentionally, I’ll be stuck here. I won’t die, but I’ll never be able to go home again. And that was the plan. To have an adventure and go back home, hopefully changed for the better because, as I was, I couldn’t get much worse.

“What other world is there?” I ask with all the bluster I can manage. Fitspur slumps, looking defeated.

“I’m not saying there’s another world. That’s barmy. But there *is* a way to kill him,” he insists sullenly.

“And how do you know that?” I ask.

“My people have a legend,” he intones meaningfully.

“Oh great. The ogres have a legend. We’re all saved,” I deadpan. For a moment I thought I had a chance to complete my quest, but apparently not.

“This is not folly, easily dismissed—it’s true,” Fitspur insists, his bright eyes flaring. “The elves told me it was true, and they are the keepers of all memory. The Elf Queen remembers the artifact of which I speak. She told me that it exists and that she saw it herself long ago.”

“And what is *it*?” I ask, “This thing that can supposedly kill Asphodel?”

“It is a sword in a stone.”

I raise my brows at him, intrigued. “Really?”

Fitspur nods. “The sword is not of this world. It can kill Asphodel.”

“A sword in a stone,” I repeat, feeling something akin to optimism for the first time in months. My geeky mind whirls with possibility.

Excalibur was a magical sword, capable of...wait, why was Excalibur so special? Apart from the whole getting stuck in a stone thing, I guess Excalibur was special because it killed Mordred who was ensorcelled by Morgan le Fay to be practically immortal.

It is well known to Lucitopia fans (the most fanatical of which call themselves Chronicles in the misguided belief that it’s cool) that the whole world is a rip-off of pretty much every other successful fantasy series in the history of literature. It would be completely within the purview of the author to steal some key attribute from Camelot and call it *an homage*. It’s kind of her thing. And the Arthurian legend does have the greatest mage in history in it. Maybe my quest is to be the Merlin to this remixed version of King Arthur? I always wanted to be Merlin. Or Gandalf. Which, when you think about it, is the same character, just in a different world.

I smile at Fitspur, not completely convinced, but on the road to being convinced. The hero is never supposed to find the path until he has given up all hope of ever finding it. And, I’d pretty much given up. Also, it’s the Eleventh Hour of my stay here in Lucitopia. No one ever does anything here until the Eleventh Hour.

“Tell me more about this legend of yours,” I say, making myself as comfortable as I can against the cold stone of our prison.

For the next two days Fitzpur went into detail about Calx, the sword carried by the Dragon King.

As I had nothing else to listen to but my starving innards howling at me, I got the long version of the story, which I will now boil down. Calx was lost during the centuries of peace that were the result of the Dragon King's exceptionally long reign, and the mythical blade fell into legend. Now it supposedly slept, encased in stone, awaiting the day a great hero who was pure of heart would free it and use it to save the world from evil. Calx is reported to be the only thing that can kill Asphodel.

Now, *Dragon King* is a favorite of mine, yet I had never gleaned from the story as it was written that there was anything special about his sword—apart from the fact that it was one of his actual bones, and that he used to sheathe it in his chest, which is just such a great visual when you think about it. I thought the Dragon King killed Asphodel because *he* was special, not that his sword was. But I also know that there's a lot about the way I remember Lucitopia that is very different from how it turned out to be once I got here.

For instance, though I can remember that David, the Dragon King, wed his true love Jonara at the end of the story, a lot of the details about how they got to the wedding are a bit hazy. I remember that there was a dragon horde they used to buy an army, a bunch of cleverly designed lockboxes, and a great battle. I also remember Asphodel tying Jonara to stake, echoing how she was tied to a stake at the beginning of the story when she was

offered up to Dragon as a sacrifice. The author loves bringing a story back to where it started to prove how clever she is. Personally, I think it's a bit much.

Anyway, I remember so many details, except how David and Jonara actually defeated Asphodel. In fact, I can never remember how any of the heroes in the *Chronicles of Lucitopia* ever defeated Asphodel. If I could, believe me, I would be copying them. I know they all had swords, but so does every hero. And besides. To get out of Lucitopia, I must defeat Asphodel with magic. That part of my contract is perfectly clear. Killing him with a sword might not fulfill my contract, and I might still be stuck here even if he is dead. I do, however, very much want Asphodel dead.

"It's the *before* thing that makes me doubt the whole legend," I say, as I throw a pair of rushes, each marked with four dots of green blood.

"What do you mean, the *before* thing?" Fitspur asks. He throws three rushes marked with two red dots of blood. Three of a kind when I only had two of kind.

"Damn," I curse as he gathers up all the rushes between us—the winnings, I guess you'd call them.

In the last two days we've managed to cobble together a poker-adjacent card game called "castles" out of the rushes from the floor. We used our own blood to mark the cards. Gruesome, I know, but we had copious amounts of two different colors of blood handy, and apart from PC gaming, playing cards has always been a favorite pastime of mine. It reminds me of my mom.

"You keep saying that Calx can kill Asphodel because it has killed Asphodel *before*. But obviously..." I trail off because I feel like this needs no more explanation.

Fitspur pauses in his dealing of our bloody rushes to look at me. "Obviously what?" he asks.

"Obviously, he's not dead!"

"Well, not anymore," he replies as if that's totally normal.

I stare at Fitspur, nonplussed. "I can't tell if you're not understanding this, or you've lost so much blood that I should be worried about you," I say. "What's the good of killing him if he just comes back?"

"Well, he doesn't come back right away."

"How long does it take, then? A week? A century?"

“I duuno! Look, it’s a Timekeeper thing, okay? Something about a paradox, and the Blank Zones,” Fitspur says, shrugging.

“Blank Zones?” I ask.

“You need to talk to the elves. They’re the only ones who can explain it properly.” He goes back to dealing and I move on.

We play silently for a few hands while I contemplate if *temporarily* killing Asphodel will fulfill my contract. But now that I consider it, how have the other tourists in Lucitopia gotten out of here? I don’t know what their contracts looked like, but it occurs to me that I may not need to come up with a permanent solution. As long as he looks dead, it might just be good enough. Maybe the author doesn’t want anyone to *really* kill Asphodel. It occurs to me that any story is only as good as it’s villain, and once you’ve spent all that time creating a lunatic like Asphodel, why waste him?

“So, how are you going to find Calx?” I ask, staring at the horrible hand I’ve been dealt. Literally and figuratively.

“No idea,” Fitspur replies, intent on his rushes.

I look up at him, stunned. “Then, you’re no closer to killing him than I am!” I throw my rushes down. “That’s just—you should have opened with that two days ago, you know.”

We hear commotion coming down the stairs outside the dungeon. Fitspur and I share a panicked look. Asphodel isn’t supposed to return for hours yet, but I can clearly hear his raised voice as he descends the spiral stairs. So can Fitspur.

He stands abruptly. “Put me back in,” he says hurriedly as he positions himself in between the two spiked halves of the iron maiden.

“I can’t,” I dither, getting to my feet as well.

“You won’t kill me, Ramsay,” he assures me, “the spikes are placed to cause me pain, not end my life. Please.” His bright eyes plead with mine. I shake my head and his face falls as he realizes I may not be able—emotionally or physically—to do what he asks.

We hear a woman speaking in sharp tones to Asphodel and then, in the tense silence that follows an abrupt halt, we hear the low rumble of what I’ve come to think of as Asphodel’s *really angry voice*.

Fitspur comes out from between the halves of the iron maiden long enough to punch me in the face. Except his aim is bit high and he ends up

punching me in the forehead.

“Ow,” I say, rubbing the spot above and between my eyes.

“Stop moaning and do it!” Fitzpur hisses at me as he gets back to his place inside the iron maiden.

Asphodel is right outside the door of the dungeon. I shut my eyes and throw my weight against the door.

I hear a sickening crunch, and Fitzpur’s groan of agony, but there is no time for me to linger on the awful thing I’ve just done to someone I’m starting to think of as a friend. Asphodel enters the dungeon, dragging some poor young woman behind him by a thick chain.

I toss myself into the rushes at the base of my wall as quickly as I can, and pretend to rouse myself awake as Asphodel comes storming into the dungeon proper. I’ve never seen him this angry. He hauls his prisoner into the cell next to my wall, not allowing her a chance to get to her feet. She tumbles about on the ground next to me, a tangle of long platinum hair and flailing legs as he hauls her behind bars. I lean away from my wall and angle myself so I can see inside the cell. Asphodel throws the chain over a hook suspended from the ceiling of her cell. He is shaking with rage.

“You will tell me what I wish to know, your majesty, or I will flay the skin off your bones,” he promises her as he pulls down on the chain.

The girl is yanked upward, her arms suspended overhead. Asphodel keeps pulling on the chain until she is stretched to her limit and barely balancing on the tips of her toes. He attaches the loose end of the chain to the far wall, and then he comes back to her to get in her face.

The girl flips her glassy hair out of her eyes as best she can to glare at him. She is so fair her skin is nearly translucent. Her ears are pointed, and her eyes are almond shaped with enormous, black pupils that nearly crowd out the iris and the whites. She is tall and impossibly slender, but not boyish. The leaf-green tunic and bark-brown hose she wears are snug enough that I can see the gentle slopes of her hips and breasts.

She says something to Asphodel, but I completely miss it because I think I’ve gone deaf. She is the most beautiful girl...elf...female humanoid...I have ever seen, and my higher thought functions are scrambling to process this catastrophe. Through the foghorn-like sound of panic in my brain I manage to notice that Asphodel’s perfectly sculpted

mouth moves a little too close to her parted lips and I want to punch him in the balls.

Wait. Are they *attracted* to each other?

“Enjoy this time as best you can,” Asphodel tells her in his dulcet voice. The douchebag. “For when I return, you will either tell me about my past or I will see to it that you have no future.”

Asphodel steps outside her cell and raises a hand. He closes his eyes and whispers, head bent in concentration. I feel the air around me rush toward the elf’s cell, and on the magical wind that he has created is the sound of Asphodel’s whispering. The door to the cell shuts on its own and glows with violet-white light.

Asphodel exits the dungeon without so much as a glance at Fitspur or me, but I can see that he is pale and drained from doing real magic. I wait for the very last of Asphodel’s footsteps to disappear before I spring up and rush to the iron maiden.

“Stupid question, but do you want me to let you out? I may have to put you back in after a few hours,” I remind Fitspur, placing my fingertips on the door gingerly.

“Let me out,” he says in a high-pitched wheeze.

“Alright. On three. One...” I yank the door open before getting to two because...you know. Mad Max.

“You did it again,” Fitspur says, his voice still in that high wheeze. And then he makes a creaking noise as he falls forward to the floor.

I crouch down next to him. “I know. Sorry.”

Fitspur rolls around on the ground for a while in sheer agony. When he stops, I prop him up in a semi-seated position.

“You’re actually *helping* him,” the elf says, sounding surprised.

I look over my shoulder at her, but before I can respond to the rather rude comment, Fitspur raises his pained voice.

“Queen Isfin! How came you to this loathsome place?”

Sometimes the dialogue in Lucitopia is relaxed. Modern, even. And then there are other times when it reverts to the antiquated verbiage that can pass for some as “Epic Fantasy Speech.”

There are divergent ideas about why this is. Most of the Chronicles veer in the direction of the characters using heightened language in heightened situations, but I think it’s just another example of the inconsistent writing.

Which, ironically, is the only consistent thing throughout the anthology. But in this case, I'm going to have to side with the Chronicles. Isfin has definitely heightened this situation.

"The same way you found yourself to be here, Prince Fitzpur. I was caught by Asphodel," Isfin replies with a wry smile.

"Prince?" I blurt out, looking at Fitzpur.

"I am the son of the Ogre Whump, so yes, I guess you'd call me a prince. Such as I am. Which right now is quite useless," Fitzpur replies, gesturing to his wounds. "You must release the Queen," he tells me.

I roll my eyes at him. "You know I can't."

"You must," Fitzpur insists. "Do you have any idea who she is?"

I look over at her. She's staring at me with her big eyes narrowed distrustfully, and her mouth tilted up in a bitter sneer.

"You called her Queen Isfin, so I'm assuming she's Queen of the Elves," I say, sounding unimpressed. Though I am impressed. In a world chock full of mythical creatures, the elves are regarded with special reverence, though I have no idea why because I'm not sure what the elves actually *do*.

I gesture a belated bow from my seated position. "Your majesty," I say with forced cordiality. She's still looking at me with the same fascinated disgust normally reserved for things you pick out of your bellybutton.

"You're human," she says.

"He is, your majesty. His name is Ramsay, and he is Asphodel's apprentice. He will free you," Fitzpur promises.

"W—I can't do that," I sputter.

"She can lead us to Calx," Fitzpur says, rounding on me.

"You told him about Calx?" Isfin asks, dismayed.

"Yes, majesty, and he will aid me in my quest. Ramsay has agreed to release me after he is released by Asphodel."

Isfin stares at Fitzpur like she doesn't even know where to start. "Fitzpur. This man is Asphodel's spy," she says as kindly as she can.

"What?!" Fitzpur and I say simultaneously in a chorus of disbelief.

Isfin shifts uncomfortably on her toe-tips and tries to catch a breath, which is quite hard to do when you are hanging from your wrists. I know this because this isn't my first time in Asphodel's dungeon.

“Do not feign innocence,” she tells me. “It’s no coincidence that Prince Fitzpur and I find ourselves imprisoned together. Obviously, you were set here by Asphodel to uncover our plans.”

I’m flabbergasted. “I am no spy!” I exclaim indignantly.

“Then come free me,” she says simply.

“I can’t!” I retort, gesturing to the chain about my ankle.

“Because you are Asphodel’s spy. His...” she searches for a wording she thinks I might understand... “*inside* man,” she finally decides. Clearly, she is not accustomed to using colloquialisms. That is super cute.

“Look, your majesty, that was a *Sealing* spell he cast on your cell,” I say.

“And?” she replies.

I pause to rub what I realize is vermin off my forehead. And now, apparently, I have lice. Wonderful.

“The spell is tied to his breath,” I say, heaving a sigh at the general humiliation of this entire situation.

“Fine,” she says.

“His actual breath,” I repeat, in case she doesn’t understand. “I’d need him to breathe on the bars in order to lift the spell.”

“No you don’t,” she says, shaking her head as best she can from between her upraised arms.

I chuff and throw up my hands. “Really?” I retort flippantly.

“Really,” she replies.

“Well, I’m sorry, but for me to break his spell without his breath, I must tap into my life-force and use up more years than I have left to live. That means I would die before I lifted the spell, which is perfectly useless for both you and me. But mostly me. Because I’d be dead.”

She looks at me like I’m a dullard. “Yes, that would be true, but for the fact that I’m an *elf*,” she says, like that clears the whole thing up.

“I can see that you’re an elf,” I retort, not getting it.

I can tell there’s a step I’m missing, but I’m still too—is there a word for being angry because you’re embarrassed? Humilimad? Angerbarrassed? Well, whatever it is, I’m still too worked up about the lice to ask her for an explanation.

She narrows her eyes at me. “Do you truly not know, or are you feigning ignorance so you may keep me in my cell?”

“Ramsay,” Fitzpur says, catching my gaze. He is looking at me distrustfully. “Elves are practically immortal.”

“What has that got to do with me?” I reply.

I’m searching my mind for any snippet of information that might help me, but the books that I’ve been allowed to read in Asphodel’s library are all completely absent of any substantive information about elves. Come to think of it, that’s quite odd, considering the wealth of information I’ve been given on all the other species in Lucitopia.

Fitzpur shoots me an odd look. “Do you know what immortal means?” he asks delicately, almost as if he’s wondering if I’m short on wits.

“Of course, he does, Prince Fitzpur,” Isfin interjects, her posh voice dripping with venom. “He only pretends to be a dolt so that we might dismiss him, when really, he was placed here to gather information for his master!”

“That is just rubbish!” I shout at her.

“Then, how can you not know that in order to release me all you need do is take the life-force from me!” she shouts back.

“I would never!” I think I actually clasp my breast in horror like some Elizabethan grandma. But from what I’ve seen of Asphodel taking the life force from other magical species of Lucitopia, my reaction is on scale with what she suggests. Any form of torture would be better than that.

“Oh, I get it now,” Fitzpur says, his face breaking with relief. “Your majesty. Ramsay here has only ever seen Asphodel drain our magical brethren of their magic until they die. He has no notion that a harmonious partnership is an option for a magical being and a sorcerer.”

“Mage,” I correct automatically. I shake my head and try to make Fitzpur stop dragging himself closer to the queen, as he is leaving a worrying trail of green blood behind him. “Will you please hold still before one of your organs pops out?” I beg him.

Isfin looks at me, with her eyes wide. “Could you really not know?”

I sigh deeply and face her. “Apparently, I am as big a dolt as you assumed I couldn’t be, your majesty.”

Her tone softens, though her expression is still tentative. “Magic requires life-force, does it not?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“Elves have life force that is nearly eternal. We cannot cast spells the way human sorcerers can, but we can be a wellspring of power for them with no harm done to ourselves.”

Well, now I feel like an idiot. I look away from her to clear my head. I can't think straight when I'm looking at her.

“If you are a wellspring of power eternal for Asphodel, then why does he drain fairies, trolls, and ogres?” I ask. “Why not take one elf to be the source of his magic?”

She smiles at me and laughs, almost looking like a teenaged girl, though I know she is probably older than the pyramids. Her laughter makes her lose her balance, however, and it takes her a few tries to gain purchase on her tiptoes and stabilize herself. It looks to be an incredibly taxing endeavor and I feel guilt tugging at me as I watch her.

“You cannot drain magic from an unwilling elf as you can from other creatures,” she continues when she has caught her breath again. “Our life force is a gift only we can give.”

“Oh,” I say simply. “Well, that explains it.” I frown at a new thought. “Except you are here, your majesty. Why did he take you prisoner if he cannot use you?”

“There are other ways Asphodel can use me.” Isfin's lovely eyes drop to the flagstones. “He wants to know who he is, and I am the only one who can show him who he was.”

O kay, so I'm jealous.

I mean, I've always hated Asphodel, but that's to be expected. He's an infuriating combination of handsome, talented, and evil. It's impossible for any halfway decent individual not to despise him. But now, seeing true sadness in Isfin's demeanor as she speaks of him, I feel genuine envy toward him for the first time. She obviously has feelings for him.

"Asphodel is alone, and he has been for untold eons," Isfin says with just a hint of huskiness to her voice that I find simultaneously alluring and infuriating because it's over Asphodel.

"He's alone because he probably *ate* the last eligible woman to come to the Ebon Spire," I grumble, and I'm not entirely joking either. I have no idea what becomes of the creatures he drains, but I've never seen one buried. And there's always food about the castle. I've been looking askance at the meat for the last few months.

Isfin tries to shake her head as if I don't understand, but in doing so she throws herself off balance again and must dance on her tiptoes to regain her tenuous contact with the ground.

"What I mean is that there is no other like Asphodel. I may be nearly immortal, but so are other elves, and though life may seem over-long to me at times, there are others who share this burden with me. That is not so for Asphodel, for he is the only one of his kind."

"There are other humans—" I begin incredulously, but I break off suddenly, shake my head, and come toward her. I simply can't watch her

endure this anymore. “Forgive me, majesty, but I’m having trouble hearing you over the jingling of your chains.”

I did put a slightly humorous inflection into my tone, but I am still surprised when she laughs. Very few people find me funny. I can’t help but feel gratified that she does.

I get to the end of my restraint and stop in front of her with the bars between us. Though she is quite tall, she still has to look up at me. I was always a few inches too tall, a few inches too doughy around the middle, and a bit too quick to compliment girls I liked for any of them to take me seriously. Her upturned face is nearly luminescent even in the penetrating dinginess of the dungeon. I’ve got to get a grip. Acting on my impulses to shower girls with adoration only ever got me hurt.

“Would you be so kind as to assist me so that I don’t drop dead while I free you?” I say in my most casual tone.

Again, I see a flash of humor in her before she gives me a doubtful look. “Do you know the spell?”

I roll my eyes. “I am Asphodel’s apprentice, your majesty. He likes to surprise me with little tests. And if I fail,” I trail off and gesture to our current predicament.

Fitspur guffaws. “Considering that, you might want to remind him of that spell.”

“Shut it,” I growl back at Fitspur before facing the queen again.

I’m a little nervous because, though I know the spell, there’s no guarantee I’ll be able to perform it. I’ve studied every tome dedicated to incantation in Asphodel’s library. I’ve memorized everything that Asphodel has set before me. I’ve even practiced potions, though Asphodel believes them to be nothing more than “witch’s brews,” but I’ve never done any real magic before.

Illusions, sure. I’ve made some really uh...believable illusions. Especially since there is literally no such thing as porn here. This kept me occupied for a few months, but ultimately, I realized nothing had changed either in my life or in the world around me so I stopped. I want to do something real in this imaginary world, but I have never been able to because I refuse to kill another being for my own gratification. And I don’t want to turn into a feeble, ninety-year-old man just to perform one decent spell. So, I’ve never done real magic before.

“What do I do to um...you know. Get at it? Your life-force, I mean.”

I sound like an idiot, so I shut up. Exactly how would one ask an elf where she keeps her life-force and how to suck it out of her without sounding like a giant pervert? But she either doesn't get it, or she lets me off the hook.

“Right,” she says, nodding in brisk understanding. “That would be clear to you if we were touching.” She tries to angle closer to the bars, and in doing so, loses her balance again.

On impulse, I reach through the bars to catch her. Somewhere in the back of my mind I know that it's impossible for her to fall because she's suspended by a chain, but I catch her anyway because that's what I do. I'm a door opener, a chair puller-outer. I let girls go first, and I always offer to carry heavy things for them. I guess I'm old-fashioned. I've even been called patriarchal by a few of my female friends, but I don't mean anything demeaning by it. I was raised the way I was raised, and under pressure I revert to what I know. When I see a woman slip or lose her balance, I step in to steady her, and this time it really kicks me in the ass.

It's like I've been struck by lightning. Not that I would know what being struck by lightning feels like, but I licked a battery once. I guess it's like that, except over my entire body. It's not pleasant, or even remotely enjoyable, but at least it's not an illusion. This is real.

“The spell,” she says, looking up at me. Her eyes are amber.

“Huh?”

“Say the spell, boot-brain,” Fitspur gripes behind me.

“Right.” I say briskly. I close my eyes to say the spell, focusing on the rolling vowels and sharp consonants, rather than Isfin's eyes.

I can feel the difference immediately. I could describe the sensation with a thinly veiled sexual entendre that is nearly wrote for a fantasy book and say something like, *I feel her life force coursing through my body, swelling me with power.*

And I guess that's true. But it's more like when you're watching a good movie and you cry because the actors cry. I'm not saying I'm going to cry right now, but that feeling of sympathy is the same. It's a surprise, really, to suddenly recognize yourself in someone else who is essentially a stranger.

The sound of my voice whispers on the gust of wind that catches Isfin's tunic and sends strands of her white-blond hair aloft. The chains

restraining her give way and she droops. I've still got a hold of her, and I steady her through the bars until she regains her footing.

"You actually did it," she says, frowning with disbelief. "You set me free."

Obviously, she still doesn't trust me. I step back, releasing her as if burnt. And maybe I am. It appears only one of us got the feeling we were sympatico.

I go to the door of her cell and pull it open. Asphodel didn't lock it with an actual key because, why would he? The spell he cast was much more powerful than iron. I suddenly find that I am tired. I go to my wall, put my back against it, and slide down until I'm sitting amongst the rushes opposite Fitspur again.

"Thank you," Isfin calls after me.

I don't look at her, but it doesn't matter. I'm so aware of her it's like I can still see her. She's rubbing her wrists as she comes out of her cell to join us.

"Was that your first true spell?" she asks delicately as she crouches down to form a triangle with Fitspur and me.

I nod, still avoiding her eyes.

"No!" Fitspur says, incredulous.

"Of course, it was," I chide, kicking rushes at him. "I'm not a murderer."

"I know. I'm just amazed," he replies contritely. "Your first spell—and it was strong enough to break one of Asphodel's." He cringes in pain around his still-healing wounds as he leans toward me to thump me heartily on the shoulder. "That's fantastic, brother, and well worthy of a hero's feast."

"Thank you," I say, a small smile stealing across my lips. "If her majesty is willing, I could heal you as well."

Isfin holds out her hand to me and I take it. The shock is less, well, shocking. I feel warm all over and my blood is pounding. Unfortunately, more warm blood in certain areas of my body could be hugely embarrassing for me, so I rush through a *Healing* spell as quickly as I can (they take forever), and let go of her. When I open my eyes, Fitspur is marveling at his completely whole body.

"Amazing." He looks up and grins at me.

He's right. I should be jumping up and down right now. I performed real magic not once but twice, and I'm not dead or an incontinent old man. But I can't be as happy as I should be because I can already tell this is going to cost me, and not just because Asphodel is going to kill me. *She's* going to cost me. I know what that's about, and I think I've had enough of caring more about a woman than she does about me for one lifetime. So, no thank you.

"Enjoy it while you can, for Asphodel will return soon and then... Well." I glance at Isfin and shrug a fatalistic shoulder. "It's been a pleasure, your majesty."

"He'll *kill* you?" she asks incredulously. "But you've only let me out of my cell. That hardly seems worth killing one's apprentice over."

"You say you know Asphodel?" I rejoin. "He'd kill me for using the wrong fork."

"Then we must leave here before he returns."

"How?" I ask her. "The Ebon Spire is a labyrinth that's constantly changing. In truth, Asphodel need never lock his dungeon, or cast any sealing spells, for if you but set foot from this room you will be wandering its halls forever."

"That can't be," Isfin replies, frowning. "How is it you have lived here and performed duties? Does Asphodel lead you from room to room?"

I see the doubt in her eyes, and it bothers me more than I can justify. "Still think I'm a spy, do you?" I ask harshly.

She recoils as if stung. "I am merely suggesting that you must have navigated this castle on your own. If you've done it before you could do it again."

I open the collar of my linen shirt at the throat and point to my naked chest. "Not without a wayfinder amulet, I can't."

"What's a wayfinder amulet?" Fitspur asks.

"It's enchanted. I tell it where I want to go, and it grows warm when I'm going the right way and cold when I take a wrong turn."

"That's inefficient," Fitspur retorts.

"Very," I agree. "But after nearly a year of living here, I still couldn't do so much as walk to the privy without my amulet." Isfin breathes in sharply, about to say something, but I know what she's going to say, and I stop her. "And no, I can't make one, not even with your help. The Ebon Spire is like

a puzzle and the wayfinder amulet is the decoder ring. Every few hours the castle resets itself, but that doesn't matter to the amulet because it knows the code. I don't."

Isfin and Fitspur exchange confused looks. Not a lot of code breaking in Lucitopia, and definitely no cereal boxes with decoder rings inside.

"Never mind," I tell them, waving a hand. "To put it simply, the spell to make such an amulet is unknown to me."

We deflate and stare at the rushes for a while. Isfin cocks her head questioningly as she stares at them.

"Are those rushes randomly dotted with blood like cards for Kings and Castles, or did you two do that on purpose?" she asks, looking up at us with such a quizzical and amused expression I feel a smile warming me from the inside out. I frown to fight against it.

"Ramsay and I made them," Fitspur replies, laughing. "Helps keep the mind off the demands of the body."

"Yes," she replies as she glances down at my ankles. Unfortunately, they started bleeding again around the cuffs when I strained against the limit of my chain to reach inside her cell.

I can't hide the blood, though I feel the urge to. I don't know why, but I feel naked when she looks at me, and I can't figure out why. I mean, I was attracted to her the moment I saw her, but this is something different. And very annoying. I feel connected to her, and there is no reason for that other than the fact that I've absorbed part of her life-force. It appears that I am the only one suffering from this illusion of closeness, though. She is still looking at me like I'm a stranger. To busy myself, I start gathering up our marked rushes that had been scattered about when she was dragged across the floor.

"We should heal your wounds," she tells me. She reaches her hand out to me in an offering way. "If you're not too tired..."

"No," I say quickly. "I'm not. I mean, I'm a little tired but it's nothing."

Everything I'm saying is awkward. Everything I'm doing is awkward. I can't look at her without growing giddy. I don't want to touch her again, because I want to touch her a bit too much. Instead, I clamp her fingers between mine like I'm a robot closing its claw. I block her out as I intone the spell. It hurts. Like, a lot. And I think I'm going to faint.

“Ramsay stop!” she gasps. “You must draw from me, not yourself!
You’re going to die!”

I feel Isfin take my face between her hands and see her eyes looking into mine.

I resist for a moment, but then I fall into them. That feeling of connection with her returns. The spark of it is too bright and hot to be tolerated. But when it leaves, I am left too dark and cold. The pain of injury in my body ebbs, but an ache for her replaces it and I can't tell which is worse. This is terrible. Does Asphodel feel this intolerable closeness to the creatures he drains? If he does, he's even more psychotic than I'd thought.

The panic ebbs from Isfin's face until it is replaced with a smile. "There," she says musingly. She releases me and I move away from her. I need to get away from her and pull myself together. I'm being ridiculous.

I look down at my ankles and see that they are healed, but they aren't mine. They belong to a man in his fifties. I hold my hands out in front of me and watch as the thin skin and wiry sinew of five or six decades fills back in and is returned to the plumpness of the two and a half decades that they've actually lived.

I look at Fitspur. He's looking at me like he just saw a ghost.

"You turned into an old man and back again," he says with wide, staring eyes. "Don't ever do that again."

"I won't," I promise. "That was awful."

Isfin sits back on her heels and watches me. "You resisted receiving the power from me at first," she says. "That's very dangerous."

“Well, it’s not a pleasant sensation for me to take power from you, your majesty,” I mumble, avoiding her eyes, though that’s not the whole truth.

It’s not pleasant, but it is thrilling. It’s one of the most thrilling experiences I can recall. But then, afterwards, I feel compelled to move closer to her like she’s the last patch of sunlight on a cold day. All of this is too much to say aloud to someone who is little more than a stranger, and who thinks I’m spying for the most hateful individual to ever haunt Lucitopia.

So instead, I look down at the rushes and ask, “Should we play a hand?”

“Definitely,” Fitspur says, leaning closer. “It feels so good not to be bleeding!”

I smile and start shuffling the rushes. “You won’t feel good for much longer,” I tell him, trying to regain some sense of my normal self. “For I am going to trounce you like never before.”

“You’ve never trounced me to begin with,” Fitspur insists.

“Deal me in as well,” Isfin says, grinning. “I’ll trounce both of you.”

Isfin is a diabolical card player. It’s uncanny. Fitspur and I are woefully outgunned, and after just a few hands, we silently agree to play for second place. I take this time to block Isfin out as best I can. I try to barricade myself against the instantaneous obsession I seem to have sprouted for her, but it only half works. The three of us speak so easily with each other that I can’t help but enjoy myself. Which is nearly impossible in a dungeon, I might add, but I am enjoying myself more playing cards with the two of them than I have since I came to Lucitopia.

Granted, my time here was not to socialize, and the fact that I’ve done nothing but study, work out, and take orders from a madman has set the bar low. But for just this moment, starved, thirsty, and facing certain doom when my master returns, I cannot help but feel happy in this company.

“What I want to know is how Fitspur could possibly be the son of the Ogre Whump,” I say as I throw down two pair. “I thought the Whump was the strongest of his kind.”

Fitspur chuckles at my ribbing. “Just you wait, dear Ramsay. You have yet to see me healed, fed, and holding an ax. I am a true whump-son,” he promises, as he throws three high cards that beat mine.

“Yes, but is not the Whump also dumbest of them all?” I rejoin.

“So my mother would say,” Fitzpur replies with a rakish grin. “Luckily I take after her.”

Isfin’s laughter is infectious and both Fitzpur and I laugh with her. “That you do,” she replies as she throws two of a kind and three of a kind, in what is called a “full castle” here, to win yet another round.

“And, though my less than brilliant performance at cards hardly shows it, I was also schooled with the elves,” Fitzpur adds, looking at Isfin as she gathers up her winnings.

“Were you really?” I ask, glancing between the two of them. Fitzpur is watching Isfin with an adoring expression while her eyes are lowered to her task.

“Yes,” Fitzpur says quietly. “Queen Isfin visited my father’s lands when I was a whelp. She requested that I come and study with the elves.”

“While one of the younger elves from my lands went to learn from the ogres,” Isfin adds. “Exchanging foster children with other kingdoms is common enough.”

Fitzpur looks at me and raises an eyebrow. “Not between elves and ogres. Queen Isfin did something extraordinary and she will not accept the praise she deserves,” he tells me. “What she did...”

“What I did,” Isfin interjects sternly, “was subject you to years of snobbery to prove my pet theory that ogres could be as skilled at playing the lute as they are at swinging an ax, if given the opportunity.” Isfin frowns as she gathers up the rushes and shuffles them with more force than necessary. “And you proved my theory. To your detriment.”

“How can you say that?” Fitzpur asks, stricken. “You opened up the world to me.”

Isfin gives a defeated laugh and gestures to the sad accommodations around us. “And look where my fine ideas have brought you.” She drops her head. “I’m so sorry, prince Fitzpur.”

“Don’t.” Fitzpur leans across our little group to take Isfin’s hand in his. “I am who I am because of you. I do not regret that. Do you?”

Isfin looks up at him, and her face softens. “No,” she replies. “But I fear you are wrong about one thing. You are who you are because of *you*, prince Fitzpur. Not because of me.”

Wait. Are *they* attracted to each other? What the crap is going on here?

Isfin delicately removes her hand from Fitspur's and he leans back into his place as if chastened. Is everyone in love with her, or am I so blinded by my own weirdness that I'm tilting at windmills here?

Because, not for nothing, but now that he's healed, and the proper color for an ogre, I can't help but notice that Fitspur is rather good looking, even with the whole monster thing going on. His features are large, but they're symmetrical, and the tusks in his lower jaw may make his chin jut out a bit, but there's no arguing that it's a strong jaw. And his eyes really are quite striking. Though his muscles are like boulders, he's not hulking, or disproportionate in an unpleasing way.

All and all I'd say he was probably the handsomest ogre I'd ever seen, and once you get used to the differences between humans and ogres in general, I'd say he was just a really good-looking dude, period. And he's a prince. And charming. He's a green Prince Charming. And I'm a jackass with lice.

"Are you going to deal those rushes, or just shuffle them until they fall apart?" I ask Isfin, probably betraying too much of my annoyance at the fact that even the ogres in Lucitopia make better boyfriend material than I do.

"I don't know if there's time for another hand," she replies, recoiling slightly from my rudeness.

"How long do you think Asphodel was intending to leave you down here?" Fitspur asks, reading into her sudden disquiet.

I see her shoulders shrink and her lips tighten. "Not much longer, I don't think," she replies before looking at me. "You need your amulet to get us out of here. Therefore, you must return to your position as Asphodel's apprentice. To do that, you must put prince Fitspur and I back in our confinements."

I shake my head before she has finished speaking. Seeing her trussed up again is unacceptable to me—not to mention the fact that in order to put them back I've got to shish-kabob Fitspur again.

"Even if I recast a sealing spell on your cell, it will be *my* breath holding you in there," I say. "Asphodel will know the spell is not his."

"No he won't," Isfin says.

"You have a way to recreate Asphodel's breath?" I ask her doubtfully.

She nods, looking frightened.

Fitspur holds up a hand to stop whatever it is I'm about to say. "What's your plan, your majesty?" Fitspur asks her kindly, and it is his gentle tone that makes me realize that I have been quite surly with her.

She looks up at me, though Fitspur is the one who asked her the question. "I am going to reverse time," she says.

"Nonsense," I growl. "There is no such thing as time travel."

"How would you know, apprentice?" she asks me archly. "You are worse than ignorant, for with a little bit of learning you have decided that you know everything, and yet you know only what Asphodel has decided to teach you—which, as far as I can see, is little to nothing about anything important."

I want to yell at her, "*at least I've never flirted with him,*" but Fitspur seems to know that I'm about to say something unpardonable and he interrupts me.

"Queen Isfin, can you think of nothing else?" Fitspur asks genteelly. "I ask not just for my own...er...comfort," he says, gesturing to his newly healed hide, "but for yourself. When Asphodel returns, he may not release Ramsay. Instead, he may begin to make good on his promise to torture you."

She regretfully shakes her head and her hair ripples around her face like silver waves on a moonlit sea. Damn. I'm starting to sound like a half-rate minstrel, even in my own head. I have to get ahold of myself.

"Elves are not enchanters. I cannot cast or lift any spells," she tells us both. "But there is deeper power than magic at my disposal."

She stands, goes to the iron maiden, and sticks her arm inside. The bare skin of her forearm looks too fragile amid the jagged teeth and I can't bear it. I stand. I don't know why I feel as agitated as I do, only that I don't like seeing her there, amid those spikes. She starts unscrewing one of them.

"If you please, Ramsay," she says, her eyes still on her task. "Your master could return at any second."

I shift hesitantly from foot to foot. "What do you need me to do?" I ask.

Isfin leads me back to her cell, positions herself under the hook that hangs from the ceiling, and hands me the spike. "You must stab me," she answers, bracing herself.

I laugh, but she's not joking.

“Someplace not vital, if you please,” she adds quickly. “I was thinking my arm.” She flips her forearm over and shows me the bare skin there, the same expanse of skin that drew such a reaction from me just moments ago.

“Quickly, now,” she urges. “If I inflict the wound, I will move through time with you, and the whole universe will fall apart. You must be the one to do it before the observer returns so that you can manifest the opposite of the choice you made.”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupt. “The opposite of *which* choice?”

“You had a choice to leave me in my cell or let me out. The chances you would, or you wouldn’t, were fifty-fifty. When either outcome of a single choice is equally probable, both *really do happen* before the outcome is observed—in this case by Asphodel. We’re not changing the past. We will simply manifest the other outcome before he returns. That is to say, before the next link in the causal chain is formed.”

I stare at her for a beat. “I can barely understand you, let alone stab you.”

“Just give him a punch to the forehead, your majesty, and he’ll come around,” Fitspur suggest. “Worked for me.”

“Shut it,” I growl back at him. “I will not harm you, your majesty.”

“You must,” she urges, grabbing my hand in hers.

“Why?” I ask, distracted. I can feel her hands in mine, and little else. They’re small and cool and soft as wings.

“Because I’m a Timekeeper,” she replies, looking both up at me and into me with big amber eyes. “Time flows in my blood. To change the course of time, you must spill it.”

“Oh. That’s unfortunate,” I mumble. Time traveling cars, phone booths, or hot tubs—okay. But blood? That’s rather macabre for my taste.

“Not to interrupt, but I think I hear Asphodel coming down the stairs,” Fitspur hisses, trying to keep his voice lowered.

“Don’t get any of my blood on you, or you will be caught up in the memory of it, and that is not our intent. Let my blood flow, and I will manifest the other outcome for you,” Isfin instructs. “While this happens, you will feel very confused, but you must follow these steps precisely to manifest the other choice you made. Take the spike out of my arm, clean it, screw it in and then close Fitspur back in the iron maiden and your job is complete. Do you understand?”

I shake my head. “Why did I get locked up with two people who keep begging me to impale them?” I ask.

“Please!” Isfin insists. “If you don’t hurry, Asphodel will kill you and prince Fitspur. And—after he uses me—” she pauses to swallow hard at the thought, “he will kill me. Elves can be killed, you know.”

I did know that. Though they don’t age, they can be killed. But I’m not pondering the vagaries of her mortality because I’m still stuck on the idea of how Asphodel would “use” her. I can picture it much too vividly. I take the spike from her in one hand, and I grasp her slender forearm in the other. It’s so soft and pliant to the touch. I glance up at her, my face breaking.

“I can’t,” I whisper.

“You can,” she whispers back. “It will only hurt for a moment.” She smiles wryly. “To one as long-lived as I am, everything happens eventually. And sometimes, in the right conditions, I can make the opposite thing happen without destroying the universe.”

“That makes no sense,” I say.

“It will in a moment,” she replies. She gestures to her bared forearm.

I watch her eyes while I do it, as if I can share her pain by not turning away from it. I drive the spike into her forearm between the bones so as not to shatter them. Her eyes flare and she gasps, but she doesn’t cry out.

What occurs next is like nothing I’ve ever experienced—and I’ve experienced some next level shit working for Asphodel—but this is an entirely new world of weird.

I am in several places at once, and I am very confused.

I turn away from Isfin to clean the spike. And I also sit amid the rushes watching Isfin inside her cell. A third me stands and walks past me. What I think is going on here is that I am in two different times at once—the past and the present—and in the past I have bifurcated. Therefore, I am in three places at once and it is like having extra limbs.

Three sets of arms and legs are mine, but I have no idea how to get the ones that are in the present to move without moving the other ones. Screw it. I just go for it. I blunder forward, walking toward Isfin to let her out of her cell and simultaneously walking toward Fitspur to put him back in the iron maiden. There is also a third me, one who sits on the floor in the rushes and does nothing. He does not let Isfin out of her cell. My body is bobbing

in two different directions, while another perspective on the floor shows the horizon is steady. I think I feel seasick.

Holy shit this is disturbing.

The present-me, not either of the two past mes, is flailing about as I attempt to pilot two extra bodies. Clean the spike, she said. I try to wipe the blood off the spike in the rushes with large sweeping motions like I'm bulldozing the floor.

"What's wrong with him?" I hear Fitspur exclaim.

"He's timetorn," Isfin replies. "He is in three places at once—two in the past and one in the present. Fitspur, can you help him without doing his tasks for him?"

I feel Fitspur's hands on my shoulders as he tries to steady me, but it only emphasizes the *wrongness* of the situation.

"I'm going to vomit all over you if you don't let me go," I tell him. My voice rings in my ears over and over, trapped in a loop.

He lets me go, and I blunder on. I think I get the spike cleaned. Next thing is to screw it into the iron maiden. I think I do that, too. Who knows? Everything keeps telescoping in and out of three different perspectives as my mind fights to make sense of the conflicting information it's being given. It's like one of those dot pictures with a hidden image, where you squint at it and you see a picture inside the dots. Except that this is the real world I'm trying to navigate, and the picture keeps dissolving back into formless dots.

"Fitspur. Get in the iron maiden," I tell him, still trying not to throw up.

"I'm already inside," he says, though I clearly see two of him. One is inside the iron maiden and the other sits opposite one of the other mes who still sits on the floor, not letting Isfin out of her cell.

I hurl myself against the door and hear him groan in agony. I can't tell if it's *déjà vu* or if it's just that I have done this before. I stumble toward my wall.

Yes. My nice, cool wall. Right where I belong. Right where I *am*. Hello me!

I almost step on myself, which is unaccountably odd. Then I see the rushes rushing toward me and, in my delirium, I think...is that why they're called rushes?

Everything goes black.

My face really hurts.

But not as much as realizing that there is such a thing as time travel in this world. Because time travel is utter bullshit.

Now, magic is logical. Magic is just energy spent to make something happen. Maybe the thing that is happening due to magic is a little unorthodox, but there really is nothing in magic that is freakier than what happens in quantum physics. Walking through walls? Quantum particles do it all the time. Teleportation? Easy peasy.

But time travel is crap. Out of all the sci-fi and fantasy tropes, it is the one that creates a paradox, which is a scientific way of saying *utter bullshit*. So rule number one for any half-way decent story? Don't screw with time. Time travel stories never work. At least not the ones that are about someone going back in time and changing events. They do a lot of hand waving to get your eyes off the paradox, but when you really dismantle them, they don't make sense because—and this is important—nothing happens for no reason.

When I say paradox, I know you're thinking about killing your grandfather, you sick bastard. Forget about that. How killing your own grandfather became the standard-bearer for the time travel paradox is beyond me. It's unnecessarily complicated, not to mention sadistic. My own experience with time travel is a better example of why it's impossible.

I went back in time to change the fact that I let Isfin out of her cell. But if I go back and fix that, she will be in her cell in the present. So if she's in

her cell, why would present me go back in time to put her in a cell *she's already in*? By traveling back in time to fix a mistake, the time traveler *removes the cause* of the time travel.

And don't give that weak-ass parallel universe argument about how future me from another universe would inform past me that I must go back and fix a mistake that isn't there now, but was there once because—and this is important—it didn't happen when I did it the first time. When I let Isfin out of her cell there was no future me from another timeline who showed to tell me not to do it. Ergo, time travel stories that change events in the past are utter bullshit.

Speaking of bullshit, I've heard there's a Burn File for Lucitopia. The Burn Files are stories that the author started but didn't finish. She either scavenged them for a few elements that she then took to a different series, or she scrapped them entirely because she couldn't figure out how to make them work. And I've never seen a time travel story in which events were changed that worked.

I just changed an event. Which means the story I'm in is garbage because I have, exactly, no confidence that the author can pull this off. I wonder if she even finishes it, or if my story just runs out of gas and I'm left here, in Lucitopia, halfway through a paragraph. Forever.

I can't accept that. I don't want to be a Burn File. I need to think. I've read some quantum physics. Is there any way this time-travel hogwash can be even remotely possible?

Isfin *did* say something about probability, and an observer, and for some reason I keep picturing a cat in a box. Didn't I see a show on the Science Channel about something called Schrodinger's cat? It was both alive and dead. I think I know what that feels like now.

"Ramsay? Have you died on me?" asks Asphodel in a vaguely curious way.

"Yes and no, master," I groan.

My mouth tastes like Schrodinger's cat peed in it. I spit out blood and bile. I must have vomited at some point before or after I busted my lip falling face first into the floor. As I get up onto my knees, attempting to become vertical, I search for Isfin and Fitspur. I find them trussed up and impaled, respectively.

“Here,” Asphodel says, handing me a water skin as he looks at me distastefully. “Can’t have you breathing on me like that.”

“No master. Thank you master,” I reply as I trudge to standing.

Asphodel lifts a hand and the shackles on my ankles open. I rinse my mouth out and splash a little of the cool water he has given me onto my face. Then I take a long drink. This is the thirstiest I’ve ever been in my life.

“Easy now, Ramsay,” Asphodel says as he takes the water skin away from me. “Don’t want you emptying your stomach. Er...again,” he says kicking some of the rushes I’ve soiled away from his boots.

I stare at him, trying to put it together, but I’m past understanding anything. My head is throbbing, and I think I might vomit again. Standing is almost too much for me. I have no idea how much time has passed, and I think I’m still seasick—or timetorn, as Isfin called it.

“Why are you here?” I ask him. He does not choose to interpret my blunt tone as insolent, and that’s a good thing because despite my current agony I don’t want die just this second.

“Your two days are done, my apprentice,” Asphodel informs me cheerfully. He hands me my wayfinder amulet. “It is time for you to resume your duties.”

“Yes, master,” I say, putting it on. “What task would you have me perform?”

“Whatever brings you to food, rest, and a bath, my apprentice,” he replies, waving a desultory hand to indicate that my presence is no longer desired. “I will summon you when I find a use for you.”

“You’re staying here?” I blurt out.

His forehead creases in confusion. “Yes. I have business here.” He annunciates slowly, as if he’s concerned that I can no longer understand him properly.

I glance again at Isfin hanging from her chains, and Fitspur crammed in his iron maiden. The thought of leaving them here with Asphodel, helpless as they are, is like a stone in my chest.

“You know, I’m feeling quite invigorated,” I lie cheerfully, though I am fighting to keep my feet under me. “That water revived me, and I am here at your disposal. Shall I take notes for you, master?”

Asphodel looks at me like I just grew another head. “No, Ramsay. I require nothing further of you at the present time. Please, do retire.

Immediately.”

There is no way for me to disobey his direct order without causing more harm than I could ever hope to avert by staying.

“Yes, master,” I say as benignly as I can. I bow and take my leave.

When I get to the door of the dungeon I mumble, “The kitchens,” to my amulet. The walls move behind me, and new paths open in front of me. I must close my eyes to block out the swirling feeling that is no longer just inside me, but all around me as the Ebon Spire resets itself.

After I sense that the walls and floors have settled, I open my eyes and turn left, then middle, then right. My amulet warms when I face the right corridor, and I go down it. My destination is not far. It’s never far unless Asphodel wants to delay my arrival somewhere for some reason. Not that he is in total control of how the Ebon Spires changes—he isn’t.

The nearest I can figure is that there is a program running that he wrote centuries ago, but not even Asphodel can keep up with it all the time. On a few occasions I’ve heard him whispering to the air for directions. I don’t know where he keeps his amulet, but I know he must wear one. At this point I think the Ebon Spire is not so much a building as it is a pet that runs amok in the garden when the master isn’t paying attention.

I reach the kitchens and find two empty sets of clothing moving about the room. The clothing have living people in them. I just can’t see, hear, or touch them. Michelander and his wife Valerie have been cursed to be bodiless and voiceless to everyone but Asphodel.

Asphodel told me their names when I came to the Ebon Spire, and that they were working off a great debt they owed him, like invisible indentured servants. They can touch and move things, hear, breathe, eat, but to me they just look like haunted clothes. They can have no deep communication at all with this world. Even the words they try to write become invisible as soon as the ink hits the page. Michelander showed me once. He dusted flour across a countertop and tried to write in it, but it erased itself after each stroke of his finger and he and Valerie have been like that for centuries.

For those of you who haven’t read the same scrolls I have, let me just tell you that the life-force required to cast a spell like that is staggering. Like, hundreds of fairies must have been drained for that shit, and fairies are the largest source of magical energy. Well, apart from elves, as I’ve only just learned. Whatever Michelander and Valerie did must have really pissed

off Asphodel, and I say that not just because of the obvious life-capital he must have spent. I say it because though he kills creatures every day, this pair he keeps alive and close to him so he can watch them suffer. It's an extra special kind of creepy.

As I enter the kitchen Valerie startles at what I can only assume is my horrendous appearance. The sleeve of her dress comes up to the place where her lower face should be, as if she is covering her mouth to smother a gasp. Michelander and Valerie are surprisingly expressive for clothing, and after a year of having only them and Asphodel for companions, I've learned to read their gestures.

"Don't worry," I tell her as I shuffle in to take my usual seat at their table. "It feels far worse than it looks."

I sense a presence by my shoulder, and I reach up with a wan smile to touch the back of her hand. I can't feel her hand beneath mine, but I can see a space between my shoulder and my fingers. I pat at the thin air I assume is the back of her hand.

Michelander spins away sharply and starts storming about the kitchen. I think he's raging as he pours me a watered-down beer and brings me a few slices of black bread. I see the edge of Valerie's apron lift and dab at the edge of the place her eyes must be. I think she's crying. These two really are the sweetest.

"I'll be alright in no time," I promise them.

I pull the bread apart with my fingers. God my fingers are filthy. I put a piece of bread between my teeth anyway and swallow it down with a swig of beer. Chewing is too hard right now. I'm nauseous and the last thing I want to do is eat.

"I'm more worried about the two other prisoners I left in there," I say when my mouth is empty again.

Michelander pauses as he puts a bowl of hot broth in front of me. I see he and Valerie shift ever so slightly toward each other. They're acting strangely hesitant. I look between them.

"Do you know who he has down there?" I ask, taking up the broth.

Michelander's cravat bobs, as if he just swallowed hard. Then it tips slightly as if he is nodding.

They grow still, and the quality about them becomes solemn. Their shoulders curve subtly, both of their gazes have possibly dropped to the

floor as if they are caught up in thought. Or maybe a memory.

“You know them,” I guess. They both seem to grow restless as if my guess isn’t quite right. “You know *her*. Queen Isfin,” I say, not needing the repetitive tipping of Michelander’s cravat as he nods to confirm my suspicion.

The solemn stillness descends over them again. I sip at my broth, trying to think of the next right question to ask them. I’ve tried to communicate more deeply with Michelander and Valerie before, believe me. I suggested a system where they could arrange objects that stood for letters or simple phrases to learn something about their story, but as soon as they tried to arrange objects to communicate, they temporarily lost the ability to move anything. All they are allowed to do is gesture with their bodiless bodies, and I’ve seen even that has limits placed on it by the curse.

I can tell that they don’t just know *of* Isfin—they *know* her. And I desperately want to know more about her. I hate that I’m desperate to know more about her. I shouldn’t be, considering I came to Lucitopia because I’d had enough of being desperate about other people.

These are the facts of my current situation. I have two weeks to get out of Lucitopia. I made a promise to Fitspur to free him, and if I end up freeing Isfin along the way so be it, but I’m not doing this for her. But if I free Fitspur (and possibly Isfin) I’d better have a plan that includes killing Asphodel in the near future or I’m a dead man.

“You two have been with Asphodel from the start, haven’t you? I ask.

They both nod.

“Can the sword named Calx really kill him?” I ask Michelander.

I see his cravat jerk downward in a definitive *yes*.

“Does Queen Isfin know how to find Calx?” I ask Valerie.

One of her sleeves comes up to her waist, as if she is resting a hand there in consideration. Then the shoulder of her dress rises in a slow shrug, as if to say *it’s possible*.

“Good,” I say quietly. And not because it means I’m practically required to save Isfin now. Not everything is about her. Though, a lot of things in my mind are starting to rearrange themselves around her because I’m ridiculous.

I finish the broth and thank Michelander, dodge Valerie’s fussing, then shuffle off to my rooms alone. I know I’m not in any condition to be

walking around without Valerie's assistance, but I need a moment by myself. I follow my thermodynamically inclined amulet without a thought—left, right, upstairs, down again—until I am standing under the stream of heated water that sluices endlessly down the wall of my bathroom and over a small outcropping of stone.

It's not a shower, exactly. More like an indoor waterfall, and a thousand times more soothing than any shower I ever took in my world. The Ebon Spire is fitted with running water throughout, usually with one wall being the hot wall, and the opposing wall supplying fresh, cool water. I look down and watch the rivulets of water, darkened by the dirt and grime that is rinsing off my body, as they run over my feet. Water pours around my neck like a cowl. I push my hands through my hair and remember my unwanted guests.

I leave the warm arms of the waterfall to get a straight blade by the mirror on the cool water wall. When I look in the mirror, I can see why Valerie burst into tears when she saw me. Angular and fair to begin with, my face now resembles a gaunt ghost's. Both of my eyes have burst blood vessels and turned completely red. It's disturbing, and I wonder when it happened. Was it caused by the time shift, or hanging upside-down? In other words, was I like this the *entire* time I was talking to Isfin? Because I look like a frigging crack head with pink eye. No wonder she thought I was Asphodel's stooge.

I feel around at the nape of my neck for a good place to start shaving up into my hair when I realize that my scalp hasn't felt itchy. I run my fingers around, parting my hair here and there as I look for some evidence that I'm infested, but I don't see anything. I've had lice before (because Lucitopia is a medieval horror show) but I don't think I have it now, nor have I had it since I time traveled. Huh. I suppose lice don't time travel. That makes sense to me. Parasites are far too practical to do something so asinine.

I dry off and try to lie down, but after a fraught fifteen minutes or so I know that I will not sleep. I sit up and look around at my sleeping chamber and the furniture in it. My bed and clothespress are simple but well-made. The rug covering the stone floor is beautifully wrought, as are the tapestries covering the colossal blocks of granite that make up the walls. Sconces of witch-light glow between the tapestries with a throbbing quality that is nearly like a pulse. It is eerie light, but not unpleasant. Asphodel keeps the

sconces in the rest of the castle a creepy, Halloween glow-stick green, but I was allowed to choose a more soothing golden hue for my rooms.

I look through the wide, arched doorway from my sleeping room to my personal study. I see a large desk against the wall with many parchments scattered about, and shelves filled with scrolls. I can't see it from this angle, but on the other side of my study there are sand-filled skins that I use for weights and for sparring, and there is a practice sword.

I dress in charcoal colored leather breeches and a midnight blue tunic. I don't wear black. Black is Asphodel's color, for he is the master of magic here. Yet, though I am but a lowly apprentice, all my clothes, like his, are made of the finest leather and the softest linen. My boots are stout and supple. I lace them up, glancing at the rare and beautiful things around me, sort of noticing them for the first time. All my furniture faces away from the windows. I have spent nearly a year here, doing nothing but studying, sleeping, and training.

I step outside my rooms. "The dungeon," I tell my amulet.

Going back there is not the smartest thing I've ever done, but I find that it is the only thing I *can* do at this point. Asphodel will be furious when I return to his presence not two hours since he sent me from it, and he may very well string me up by something much less capable of bearing weight than my ankles this time. Yet, I'd rather endure that than pace around my well-appointed rooms alone, waiting for him to find some other reason to punish me. My prison in the Ebon Spire was never the dungeon.

Nonsensically, I climb stairs to my subterranean destination. I've come to understand that in the Ebon Spire the position of one room to another has more to do with your emotional state than actual topography. Since I dread what awaits me, I must struggle upwards, even though my rooms soar many stories above the ground and the dungeons are buried several stories beneath it. The climb gives me just enough time to realize how bone-achingly tired I am, but when I get back to the dungeon and see Asphodel staring into a pool of Isfin's blood, spilled across the floor in a patch about the size of a welcome mat, I am wide awake again.

Asphodel is on his hands and knees in the pool of blood, staring down into it, unmoving. Isfin is on the ground, lying on her side. Her arms are stretched out above her head, and blood is still leaking slowly from a hole

somewhere under her. Between her ribs, I guess. As I stumble down the stairs toward her, my feet numb, she stirs and lifts her head.

“Ramsay,” she whispers, surprised. “Quickly. While he is entranced.” And then her eyes roll and her head falls.

“Shit, shit, *shit!*” I chant as I hurry toward her.

“Ramsay,” groans Fitzpur as I pass him.

“Shit!” I shout, spinning back. I must let Fitzpur out. “On three,” I say as I’m yanking open the door to his iron maiden.

“You bastard,” he says as he crumbles to the flagstones, but I don’t stay to aid him. I go directly to Isfin and lift her in my arms.

“Where is your wound?” I ask her. I can’t believe my voice is so high and breathy. I sound like a child.

Isfin grimaces with pain and makes a vague gesture to her side, saying. “No time to heal it. You must get us out of here.”

“But what about—” I look up as I speak. As I glance across the pool of blood to assess Asphodel, a glimmer in the gory mirror catches my gaze. I can’t help it. I reach down and touch the slick surface of it, and I am trapped.

“No, Ramsay!” I hear Isfin yell as if from far, far away.

I am in the middle of a great battle.

Steel clashes against steel with metallic screams, making sparks and setting my teeth on edge. I dodge an imagined blow coming from my blind spot just behind my left ear, and narrowly miss getting showered with splinters as a ground strut on the trebuchet near me is burst apart by a direct hit from a very large rock. I stumble, reel, vault over someone’s shield, and then finally regain my footing as men behind me drop to the ground in agony. I run away from the falling trebuchet, waving my arms, and howling to push the men in front of me back. I am thrown down into the mud by more desperate men behind me. There is dead weight on top of me, and I push it aside without getting too caught up in the notion that the weight was attached to a recently alive person.

Luckily, I come up from the muck with a discarded sword in my hand. I block the fevered swings of one attacker and kick his legs out from under

him, but I withhold a killing blow once he is down. I have no idea what side I'm on, or who I'm supposed to be killing. Also, I've never actually killed anyone, and quite honestly, I would like to put that soul crushing milestone off for as long as possible.

I can hear a sonorous voice rallying the men. I push my way toward it, hearing this cry that grabs the men by the balls and hoists them up a few inches. An enchanted greatsword lights my way toward the voice. How do I know it's enchanted? Because it's glowing green.

The knight with the amazing voice is yelling, "For freedom! For justice!" and from this guy, it's not just a bunch of words usurped from a Black Panther rally. That's heartfelt blood-and-guts pouring out of him.

I push my way into the inner circle to see a knight in enameled armor the deep green color of an oak leaf, swinging his five-foot-long greatsword in rainbow arcs as he fights against four enormous obsidian trolls.

Obsidians are among the highest order of trolls. They are twelve feet tall at their smallest. Their muscles are actual boulders made of lava rock. Razor-sharp spikes of the obsidian for which they are named shoot from their backs and from other strategic places along their arms and legs. These Obsidians wield spiked maces, the balls of which are easily three feet in diameter. They loom above the knight in green armor, twice his size. Unflinching, he stands alone against them. One Obsidian steps forward and serves him a crushing blow.

Even with his enchanted sword to defend against this titanic assault, the green knight is thrown back twenty feet. His helmet is knocked from his head as he rolls. But this brave warrior will not be expelled from the fight. He anchors his greatsword into the muck to stop himself from tumbling away. A great pulse of power ripples out from the greatsword and throughout the ranks of battling soldiers, making a sound like a chiming bell.

The green knight lifts his head. He is shaken but not witless. He raises his eyes to meet a single shaft of golden light that has managed to pierce the smoke and tumult of war to grace his countenance like sunshine sifting through the canopy of leaves in an enchanted glade. Thusly haloed, the green knight shouts with grating intensity so that even the most disheartened and miserable among his men may hear his rally cry,

"For her highness! Princess Isfin!"

Christ on a bike. It's frigging Asphodel.

Someone is slapping me exceptionally hard.

Which is odd because here on the battlefield, no one is close enough to slap me. The fighting has momentarily paused, and everyone is transfixed by Asphodel as he charges forward to fight the Obsidian trolls. I feel another slap that sets my ears ringing and hear my name being called as if from far, far away.

I am back in the dungeon of the Ebon Spire. I stop Fitspur's hand before he can slap me again.

"He's awake," Isfin says. "Let's get him moving."

I see Fitspur's worried face and feel Isfin's slender frame under my arm as she helps prop me up. They carry me to the door of the dungeon, but there I stop them.

"Wait! I saw Asphodel. But not evil Asphodel. He was good. He was a hero or something." I'm babbling. I know I'm babbling because I have no idea where I'm going with this.

Isfin gives me an understanding look. "You saw one part of Asphodel's long history. A part of him he doesn't even remember anymore," she corrects. She gestures back towards the man in black, lying insensate in a pool of her blood.

Damn, that's a big pool, and Asphodel spilt all of it. "But he was *good*," I repeat.

"As soon as the blood around him begins to cool with no fresh blood to stir it, the memories will stop, and Asphodel—the evil one you know—will

wake,” she tells me.

I search her pleading eyes, looking for the signs of falsehood in them. I find none, but still cannot reconcile what I know of Asphodel and what I saw of him on that battlefield.

“He was fighting for you,” I whisper. I feel Fitspur shake me and I focus on him.

“Did you come back to save us from Asphodel before he tortured and killed us?” Fitspur says, cutting Isfin off before all his momentum is stolen.

“Well, y-yes,” I reply, stammering. “Saving you from him was the general idea.”

Fitspur gives me a rueful grin. “Then do so quickly, or you will fail entirely in your endeavor.”

I realize I have no idea why I’m feeling sorry for Asphodel. Stockholm syndrome, possibly?

“Right,” I say with a brisk nod. I step outside the dungeon walls and for the first time since I entered the Ebon Spire, I whisper, “Exit,” to my amulet.

I feel it grow warm. “This way,” I say, leading them towards the warmth.

I should be leading them to the kitchens first so that we may stock up on provisions. I should go to Asphodel’s personal chambers and break into that locked drawer in his desk and steal all his best spells. I should be asking Isfin at least one or two of the thousands of questions that keep popping to the forefront of my mind.

I do none of these things. Possibly because I’m an idiot. Possibly because I can barely keep breath in my lungs as I lead Isfin and Fitspur out of the Ebon Spire at a dead run. I am terrified Asphodel will awaken and I will have to fight him.

Since I got to Lucitopia I’ve been training to face off against Asphodel, and I’ve prepared for any eventuality—be it by sword or spell. After witnessing him do things with magic that I didn’t think possible, I was sort of hoping to avoid a wizard’s duel with him. I’d been training rather hard in the whole sword department thinking that if I got good enough, I could still win and get home. But after seeing the hero version of Asphodel on the battlefield I know that no matter how I face him, he will utterly destroy me.

I can only hope Fitspur is a better warrior than I am, and that Calx is a bloody amazing sword.

“We will need mounts,” Fitspur says, huffing along at my right. “Is there a stable?”

“I have no idea,” I reply, shrugging.

“How can you not know...” Fitspur pauses to gasp, “...have you *never* ridden out from this place?”

When I came to Lucitopia I appeared in the middle of the field of dead soldiers that surrounds the Ebon Spire. Asphodel calls it the Dead Meadow. Needless to say, I quickly made my way to the gate and begged to be Asphodel’s apprentice so that I might enter and not be torn to shreds by the dead army that had started pulling their moldy bones out of the earth.

Can’t think of a way to say that quickly, so I settle for a brief, “No. Never.”

Fitspur huffs and puffs. “But... how did you get here?”

“Magic,” I say, like it should be obvious. Which I guess it should be.

We are now pounding across the impressive entrance chamber with its black marble floors, soaring black marble columns, and the smoked quartz throne upon which I have never seen Asphodel sit. Not even once.

“Don’t worry about mounts!” Isfin shouts over her labored breathing. She clutches her pierced side. “Ramsay can conjure horses for us using my lifeforce.”

“You don’t look like you have much lifeforce to spare, your majesty,” Fitspur remarks.

Normally, I would at least guffaw at Fitspur’s attempt at humor, but I’m too concerned. Isfin is as white as a sheet of paper, and that is not a euphemism. I’ve seen darker snow. I want to help her. I feel a disturbing compulsion to pick her up and throw her over my shoulder but, given the placement of her injury, I believe I would be doing more harm than good.

We reach the black gates. It is a monolith of metal. The entrance (and exit) consists of two doors, twenty-feet high, that are sealed shut by a giant iron screw down the center. Because—I’ve always thought to myself—once you enter, you’re screwed. We skid to a stop in front of it. The amulet got me to the exit, but it has no temperature at all now that we are at it. I am left with no way to lead us through it.

“Now what?” Fitspur asks.

“Command it to open,” Isfin tells me. She is bent over and resting a hand on one knee to keep herself semi-upright. “I will give you all the power you need.”

Fitspur and I share a dubious look, but Isfin catches it.

“I’d much rather die on the other side of this door if you don’t mind,” she remarks petulantly.

“As you say, your majesty,” I mumble as I turn to the gate.

I concentrate. Should I use the spell that clears heavy obstacles, or the one that unlocks any door? What’s the point of unlocking the frigging gate if I can’t pull the enormous doors apart? But is this technically an obstacle or just a lock that will fling the doors open as soon as I command it to unwind?

“Any time now,” Fitspur snaps.

“Not helping,” I snap back.

I’ll just have to wing it. I raise a hand and open my mouth. I let the first spell that jumps off my lips be my choice, because at this point, what have we to lose?

I feel a warm, tender upwelling of strength fill me, and I see an image of Isfin in the gentle light that illuminates my mind. Fitspur’s heavy hand claps down on my shoulder, rudely ending the beautiful, and oh-so-subtly sexy illusion.

“You did it!” he shouts triumphantly. He pushes me forward and I open my eyes into the blinding light of the open field that surrounds the Ebon Spire.

The Dead Meadow. I know what’s coming next. Lots of dead guys. Isfin shrieks and throws herself against me. She tries to climb me like a tree to get away from the boney hands claspings at her ankles. I swing her up in my arms and stomp down on the scabrous things. Fitspur kicks a rotten head away from us and takes a defensive position between me and Isfin, and the dead army that has awoken.

“There is no way to win,” I warn Fitspur before he can dredge up a rusty sword. “It is a spell that summons any fallen soldier ever left unburied on any battlefield. It is endless. Eventually, you will be overcome.”

“And you’re just telling us about this *now!*?” he shouts.

I shrug fatalistically. “I figured one impossible thing at a time.”

I see his eyes grow steely and he nods once in understanding. “What are we to do then?” he asks.

“We must fly?” I guess, just throwing it out there. “But I don’t know any spell that I could use here. Do you?”

I look down at Isfin, who is draped easily across my arms. I find that she is no burden at all for me to carry. It’s not that she is weightless, but rather that it requires no effort for me to lift her. Haven’t the foggiest idea why.

“Don’t you know a levitation spell?” she asks me as she situates her arms more comfortably about my shoulders.

“Certainly. And then I guess we can just hover over the Dead Meadow until a favorable wind happens to blow us away,” I reply. “Or Asphodel will wake and kill us as we float around like very obliging quail.”

“That’s less than ideal. But quite funny,” Fitzpur remarks as he winds up a leg to boot another deadhead away from us.

“Oh, don’t kick it,” Isfin says, grimacing. “I feel bad for them now that I know what they are.”

“Easy for you to say,” Fitzpur replies, staring pointedly at her elevated position. Yet he refrains from kicking the pathetic corpse that begins pawing at him. “Think of something quickly,” he tells me through gritted teeth.

I mutter my way through the list of spells that might get us airborne. “Not *levitation*. Can’t do *flying* because that means that only I can fly. *Bounding steps*, so we only touch down two or three...? No, they’ll catch us if we touch down at all...See, this is why the dead army really works for Asphodel,” I add, almost appreciatively. “Not much you can do to get around it.”

“I said *quickly!*” Fitzpur stresses as he begins to wrestle with a few of the dead soldiers who have now risen completely from the soil.

One wears a helmet that looks like something I saw in a museum about ancient Greece, and another is all bones, but he’s carrying a rather impressive Japanese katana. Asphodel is an epic shit for not allowing these soldiers their due rest, but damn. What a great spell.

“It’s not like I’m a witch who can summon a broomstick,” I grouse back at him, but that gives me an idea. “Summoning!” I yell.

I glance down at Isfin and hold her tighter to me. “I must summon a very large, very magical creature to carry us out of here. It will require a great deal of lifeforce from you,” I tell her quietly. I don’t know why I’m being so *sotto voce* about it except for the fact that pulling power from her feels like such an intimate thing.

She nods her assent, her inhumanly large eyes titled up at me. I can feel the trusting softness of her in my arms, and the touch of her hand on the back of my neck. Damn. Being turned on while being clawed at by decaying corpses is deviant. I look away from her while I chant the spell because I feel like a giant pervert.

Just as I’m starting to doubt that the spell will work, I feel the draft of giant wingbeats overhead and hear Fitspur yell, “Get down!” in a panic-stricken voice. Apparently, the spell worked, but now I’m wondering if I’ve doomed us.

A great red-golden bird wheels in the air, flapping its four wings in a scooping motion to hover like a helicopter above us. The beast’s size would be better measured in acres than feet, but even as large as it is, there is almost no dust kicked up by the suddenly hot and dry air that is rushing about my body. The movement of fiery feathers reminds me of a flamenco dancer fanning her skirts in an artful display of strength and precision.

“A phoenix,” Isfin gasps. Hearing the awe in her voice makes me smile with satisfaction. I want to impress her. Maybe too much.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t eat us,” I mumble while I look down at the dead soldiers, who are more concerned with cowering away from the heat and light from the phoenix than they are with us at the moment.

Fitspur meets my eyes and we share a nervous glance while Isfin is still enraptured by the beauty of the magnificent creature above us.

“Take us aloft,” I tell the phoenix as if I have authority over it, though I know I really don’t.

The phoenix cocks its gold-tipped beak at me. Its eyes are magenta. No pupil, no white, just bright pink almond-shaped marbles that swirl slowly like lava lamps staring at me. I hear a warning in my head, though no voice speaks.

Tread lightly, sorcerer.

I imagine the voice is female, and for some unfathomable reason I also know her name is Yxisis.

“Mage,” I correct, though I’m so scared my knees feel watery. I’d better scroll back my gestapo tone of voice. “I would be much obliged if you would carry us out of here, Lady Yxisis.”

Well, alright. Because you asked nicely...mage.

Yxisis unfurls one of her impressive talons and Fitspur dives before it in a defensive posture.

“Protect the queen!” he howls at me, misinterpreting Yxisis’s gesture. And who wouldn’t? She could decapitate a football team with one flick of her claws.

Unfortunately, seeing an ogre barreling toward her makes Yxisis back-wing away.

“No!” I yell, running between them. “It’s okay—everything is okay! Fitspur, Lady Yxisis has kindly consented to rescue us.”

I glance up at Yxisis and think—*Pick us up, if you please, milady*—very hard in her direction.

To my surprise, she does it.

I feel hot, dry scales wrap around my middle and scoop me up underneath so that I am sitting in Yxisis’ talon like a chair, with Isfin still cradled safely in my arms.

“Let her take you!” I shout at Fitspur, while in my mind I am politely asking Yxisis to gather him up as gently as she did me and Isfin.

Fitspur is conflicted about being scooped up by such an awesome creature, but the army of the dead have recovered and are already pulling at him again. They seem to be more frantic now that Isfin and I have been taken from them. Dozens of soldiers rise from beneath the soil and move quickly to take Fitspur. After a brief flurry of energy from Fitspur, they get the better of him and start to drag him off.

“Fitspur!” Isfin screams, letting go of my neck to reach out to him even as we start to gain altitude.

Please don’t leave without my friend, I think—ask Yxisis politely.

We must go now, mage.

Though her thought-voice in my head is calm, I can hear the resolve in it. Not even she will stay to fight the dead army.

“Brother, you must run for it!” I shout at Fitspur, frantic now. I can’t allow him to get torn apart while we soar away.

Fitspur punches and kicks his way out of danger like a boss, and then leaps up to catch one of Yxis's claws. Yxis gathers him into her other talon and then lifts us into the air just in time. The dead army begins to climb over each other, making a bone-pile heap in their desperation to prevent us from escaping. Luckily, they cannot fly, and we escape the ramshackle horde with a bare sliver of light still left in the sky. That does not mean we are safe. The sun has set.

"The bats will be released soon!" I shout.

"What bats?!" Isfin shouts back.

I concentrate and think, *Lady Yxis! We must be clear of the meadow before nightfall, else...*

I hear them chittering, she replies. The bats come.

Then, Yxis bursts into flames.

Strange thing, being on fire.

I'm not sure I particularly like it, but it doesn't suck as much as I would have thought. Let me explain. Say someone walked up to me on the street and asked, "Hey, how do you think it would feel to be immolated?" I probably would not have replied, "A little itchy, but other than that, okay."

Yet, apparently, when one is riding a phoenix, and wrapped in the blue fire that immediately surrounds her body, it feels a tad annoying, and a bit hot, like wearing a wool sweater against bare skin while standing on front of a raging fireplace, but it's not agony or anything.

That is not what Asphodel's night-guardian bats are experiencing, however. Their undead bodies are trying to fly through the outermost halo of yellow fire around Yxisis and they are burning up by the hundreds. It's like watching an army of rotting, furry mosquitoes throwing themselves into a zapper, and it smells exactly as horrendous as that sounds.

"Stars of Sorrow," Isfin curses softly. I love that her curses sound more like poetry than actual swears. "How many of them are there?"

"Unknown, your majesty," I reply soberly. "But fear not. All we need do is get clear of the Dead Meadow around the Ebon Spire and they will cease in their efforts."

"Does their release mean Asphodel has awakened?" Fitspur yells from Yxisis' other talon.

"No!" I holler back. "The unburied army and the bats are unleashed if anything alive enters the Dead Meadow—even if Asphodel sleeps!"

That seems to settle both of them, though I can sense that Yxsis is still anxious about something.

What's the problem? I think-ask her.

They are flying in front of my eyes, she replies.

Can you still see, Lady Yxsis?

No.

“Son of a bi-billy goat,” Isfin gives me an odd look. “We are flying blind,” I inform her. “The bats are blocking Yxsis’ view.”

“Then we must clear a path for her,” Isfin replies.

“Are you sure?” I ask. Her eyes look sunk in shadow and I can feel her trembling with fatigue in my arms.

“No,” she says with a wavering smile. “But do it anyway.”

I stick my head out from between the cage of Yxsis’ talons and crane my neck to see in front of us. Through the glow of Yxsis’ fire, I can see the shadow of trees in front of us. Just a few more beats of Yxsis’ wings will get us there, but we are flying too low. We will hit the trees if I don’t aid Yxsis.

I don’t have time to weigh Isfin’s wellbeing against our predicament. I pull her tighter to me and whisper a *Repulsion* spell. The bats are knocked out of the sky in front of Yxsis, allowing her to see enough to adjust our trajectory. Even while I revel in the feeling of Isfin’s power in me, I feel it falter like a hand slipping from my grasp. I abruptly end my spell to see Isfin losing consciousness in my arms as the topmost leaves of the trees pass just beneath Yxsis’ talons.

“That was too close!” Fitspur calls out, obviously relieved. We watch the black cloud of bats in the dark sky wheel as one at the edge of the forest and return to the Ebon Spire.

“We need to descend!” I shout to both Fitspur and Yxsis.

“What?” Fitspur calls back, like I’ve gone mad. “Asphodel could awake at any moment!”

“Queen Isfin is unwell,” I say. “If you please, Lady Yxsis. We need help for the Queen.”

Yxsis douses her flame and beats her wings harder, gaining altitude instead of descending.

You cannot help her, mage, for you must drain her more to heal her, the phoenix replies. *I will bring her to her family in the woods.*

At this point I have no choice. I look down at Isfin and see the moonlight reflect off her smooth cheek. My mind has gone completely blank.

“Is she very bad?” Fitspur calls out to me from the other talon. “Or worse?”

I can hear his worry and judge it nearly equal to mine. “I don’t know,” I call back. “But we fly to her aid,” I assure him. I hope I sound more certain than I feel.

I don’t know how far we go. Or for how long we travel. My eyes seem to stay fixed on Isfin’s face, and I am strangely numb inside. Well, maybe not *strangely*, considering. After the last week of my life, it would be perfectly understandable if I’d simply run out of emotions altogether—considering I seem to have felt all of them to the extreme for such an extended period of time. Yet, though I feel nothing, I can’t seem to stop looking at her. Willing her to wake up.

We have arrived Yxisis tells me.

Ah—where? I reply, sounding rather stupid even in my own mind, I’ll admit.

The Sylvan Elves. I may not stay here, mage. I am most unwelcome.

Yxisis back wings and tilts precariously to penetrate the thick growth of trees beneath her, but even though she maneuvers as closely as she can to the ground, there is no clearing here large enough for her to land. Her talons are occupied with her passengers, so she may not use them to break her fall into the dense canopy of leaves beneath us. Instead, Yxisis folds her double wings in for protection. I see talons in the joints of them, and she uses these finger-like claws and her beak to break her fall as she plummets through the trees.

She dumps Fitspur while we are still fifteen feet in the air. He tumbles and rolls, cursing the whole way, but he’ll be fine. I’m assuming. He’s pretty hardy.

One talon now free, Yxisis can deposit Isfin and I gently on the ground with the other. I slide down her palm with Isfin curled close and high against my chest so that her head is covered by my arm in case of a mishap. I am barely clear of Yxisis’ scaly talons when I notice a ring of elves have already surrounded us, and they do not look friendly. Their long, lithe

bodies are coiled close to the ground, and they point silver spears at my tenderest bits.

While I'm still bumbling to find some way to explain our rather vertiginous (and destructive, now that I'm tripping over all the broken branches) intrusion upon their gentle glade, Fitspur makes better use of himself. He comes leaping to our rescue and disarms two elves. No idea how he manages it, considering how blindingly fast the elves are moving. All I know is that before I can cobble multiple syllables together, there are several elves on the ground and Fitspur is wielding *two* of their silver spears.

So, apparently Fitspur is a giant green ninja assassin. Which is great. Yay for us. I mean, we have no hope of defeating Asphodel if Fitspur is anything less than a tusked vehicle of death, but secretly I must admit that I am perversely glad Isfin is still unconscious so that she can't see me standing here, stammering like a giant dork while Fitspur singlehandedly subdues these warriors.

"Hold, friends!" Fitspur shouts before the rest of the circle can collapse on top of him. He places both spears on the ground and kneels respectfully behind them. "We have come..."

Before he can continue with his plea, one of the elves—I'm assuming the most senior one present, although who can tell because they all look like tall, gorgeous teenagers—steps forward and speaks over him.

"What do you mean by bringing that creature of fire into our sacred grove, sorcerer?" the elf demands of me.

"Oh. Right!" I dither, swinging about to glance back at Yxisis. I suppose bringing a phoenix into a highly flammable area is a pretty tone-deaf thing to do. "Well, you see..." my lame explanation is fortunately curtailed as my hold on Isfin drops a bit and the elves are permitted to see her face.

"Your majesty," the covey of elves chants, bending the knee before their queen. Which is a little silly, considering she isn't conscious to note their loyal genuflections. I suppose it's the thought that counts.

"The queen is gravely ill," Fitspur says, beating me to the punch. "This phoenix means you and your sacred grove no harm. She has generously brought us here to aid her majesty."

"Then we thank you, noble Child of the Sun," the head elf says majestically, as he bows with consummate grace to Yxisis.

Don't expect me to bow that grandly when I thank you for this, I tell her. I don't have the balance.

Don't bother to wave your hands at me, mage. It only makes me want to eat you.

I think she's kidding. But to be safe, I hurry forward to move the tasty looking elves away from Yxsis' golden talons and hooked beak.

"She has lost a lot of blood," I say, indicating Isfin's limp form draped across my arms.

I do not meet the expressions of concern I was expecting, rather I see that I am surrounded by suspicion. The covey crouches down again, their hands searching for their spears. Their eyes all seem to be trained on my lips, as if looking to see if I'm murmuring a spell.

"And who has bled her, sorcerer?" the main elf says low in his throat. His hand is on the sword belted about his narrow hips.

"Not *me!*" I blurt out, finally understanding their trepidation. "Asphodel! Asphodel took her captive and we saved her!" My gaze swings round to include Fitspur, who again steps forward with more poise than I can muster.

"I am Prince Fitspur, son of the Grand Ogre Whump," Fitspur says, his head held proudly over his monumental shoulders. "We three were imprisoned in Asphodel's dungeon where we endured torture. We managed to escape, but at a high cost to your brave queen. We beg hospice for her. I, Fitspur Whumpson, do ask this of you."

Damn, that was impressive. Even the elves are impressed, and they've seen it all.

"Make way for the Elytra!" calls a female voice from behind the circle.

A second group of elven warriors appear out of the darkness surrounding us. They carry strange blue-white lights with them, like torches, only the wrong color for fire. They are dressed in iridescent green chainmail that flashes with red and purple hues like a beetle's carapace. The silk clad Sylvan Elves step back and allow the Elytra to approach, and they do so with hastened steps and pinched lips. As they near, I realize that the lights they hold aloft are their glowing swords.

"I am Meomi, Captain of the Elytra, her majesty's personal guard," announces a big woman with white-blonde, waist length cornrows and ebony skin. It's impossible to think of any elf as being unkempt, but

Meomi's tight braids are coming undone, and from the wide hollowness of her frantic eyes as she inspects her queen, it looks as if it's been quite some time since she slept.

"Captain," I say, bowing in the most dignified way I can while trying not to dump Isfin on the ground. "I am Ramsay..." I begin, but Captain Meomi steps forward.

"We will take her now, sorcerer," she informs me briskly as she motions the other seven of her company forward.

I shrink back, holding Isfin close. "I'm quite comfortable carrying her," I say. "Only lead the way and I shall follow."

Meomi shifts on her feet, taken aback. "You must be tired after your long struggles," she says diplomatically.

"Not at all," I reply casually, stepping back as Meomi steps forward to take Isfin from me.

"Ramsay," Fitzpur says, his eyes chastising me. "Give her majesty to the Elytra. They will care for her and guard her. It is their purpose."

"Then, where were they when she got captured?" I snap back at him. I'm surprised at how furious I sound.

Meomi's tired eyes blaze at me. "This eight you see before you are all that are left of *eight* and *twenty*, sorcerer," she says with a dangerous edge to her voice.

"Mage," I correct, my eyes still bouncing around the group.

Now that I look them over, I can see that many of them have rents in their iridescent chainmail, and more than a few are bandaged. They must have been in a terrible battle, and not stopped to change or refresh themselves since. Now that I notice these details, I don't doubt that they fought with all their might to stop Asphodel, but still. I don't want to give Isfin over to anyone. It feels wrong, somehow.

"You can trust them," Fitzpur assures me. I look him in the eyes. I realize he has taken ahold of my arms and he is trying to peel them apart. "Let her go," he says soothingly.

I have been holding Isfin rather tightly. I slacken the tension in my arms the tiniest bit and she is whisked away from me.

For a moment I see her hair flicking alongside the iridescent green scales of one of her Elytra before the protective huddle of their bodies close around her and they carry her off. I feel strangely lightheaded, and I find

that I am sitting on the ground. I lean up against something warm and smooth.

I am in a white room. Or maybe not. There is nothing above me, nothing below me. I feel flat, like I'm on a wide field. I get the sense that there is an edge to this whiteness, though I can't see it, wherever it is that I am it does not go on forever.

I think I'm at the center of a blank page. Yeah, that sounds about right. The author is probably screwing with me.

Far on the other side of the page is a smudge. The smudge moves, and I see that it is a man. His shape is familiar to me. He is screaming with rage because I took something from him.

Yxisis swings her head around and fixes the magenta marbles of her eyes on me. I realize that I am leaning up against the side of her talon. What the hell just happened? Am I hallucinating?

You're not going to sleep there, are you? Yxisis asks me.

No. Just catching my breath. Or losing my mind.

I must leave this place, or I will damage it further.

I nod and crawl pathetically away from Yxisis' talon. *I thank you, Lady Yxisis. If ever you need me, I am at your disposal.*

I do not bow or twirl my arms about because I have no wish to be eaten, but still, she cocks her great, feathered head at me as if she's thinking about it. Her gilded beak tilts down so that she may get me in sight of both her eyes. It is a gimlet stare, the kind that can freeze your blood and stop your heart, but I do not feel afraid of her.

You really mean that, don't you, mage?

I've never had much respect for the type of magic user who conjured free thinking creatures without any care about what that creature needed or wanted in return.

I do. I am in your debt, Lady, and I will repay that debt at your convenience.

You're an odd one. Stand back now, mage. I am heavy with eggs and less agile than usual. I do not wish to harm you.

I step back and notice that her stomach does seem rather rounded, though I don't really know what a phoenix is supposed to look like, to be honest.

May I wish you a large and healthy brood, Lady Yxisis?

You may. Though a safe brooding ground is what I truly need.

With that, Yxisis unfurls her four wings and swirls them in the way that reminds me of a dancer's skirts. The action lifts her straight up and she hovers briefly, looking down on me with her magenta eyes, before ascending above the treetops and out of view.

"Oh, bother. You let the phoenix go," Fitzspur says behind me, sounding dismayed.

I swing my head around to look at him. It takes me a few tries and lots of squinting to get him in focus. Am I drunk?

"I do not *let* Lady Yxisis do anything," I stop here, because to explain to him that she was the one who was doing the letting, and not the other way around would take too long. "How is her majesty?"

"Bad," he replies in a solemn voice. "The king wants to know if you are strong enough to aid him in her healing."

"The *king*?" I blurt out.

There is a king. Well. What did I expect, really? She's a thousand years old, at least. Of course she has a husband. In fact, she's probably had several. Still. I'd hoped...

"The king wishes to see you immediately," Fitzspur adds, looking troubled for my sake. "He requests that you aid him in her healing."

"Of course. I will do all I can."

There is a long pause, and I realize that I am still sitting.

"Er...and are you able to stand, or should I carry you?" Fitzspur asks delicately.

"Right!" I reply, going through the complicated motions of getting myself back on my feet with the least amount of opportunity for fainting. "I'm coming. I can do this. Only lead the way," I add heartily.

Fitzspur smiles at me, but it's a watered-down smile. I can tell he isn't buying my enthusiasm.

“You did the work of an entire army with your spells, Ramsay,” he says in a low voice as he leads us through the trees and toward glowing lights. “No one would fault you for begging off now if you needed to.”

I grimace at him, puffing up my chest. “What are you on about?” I say with all the bluster I can manage. “I’m well enough to aid her majesty.”

Fitspur smiles pensively as he looks down. “Well, I’m spent. If someone asked me to do battle right now, I’d probably lay down my sword.”

I guffaw. “No you wouldn’t. You’d best a battalion.” I glance at him sidelong. “Tough bastard.”

He stifles a pleased smile, and then changes the subject.

“The king is very stern,” he warns me. “Do not try to jest with him, as is your wont, for he will not receive it well.”

I can only imagine Isfin married to some dick who makes her call him “my lord”, or “sire.” There’s a lot of that misogynistic bullshit still lingering about in Lucitopia, though I have no idea why. You’d think the author—who is a woman, after all—would be more progressive than that. But then again, who knows when she wrote most of this anthology? I hear she’s pretty old. This plot line might have been sketched out in the ‘nineties for all I know.

Regardless, Isfin is obviously the one with all the talent and power, yet she might still have to answer to some useless tool because she married him.

“I shall be as stolid as a brown cloak,” I assure him.

Fitspur heaves a sigh, sensing my internal rebellion. “Please don’t embarrass me,” he begs. “I grew up here, you know. The King Stag—actually, you should call him the Dagda—is not as bad as all that.” Fitspur pauses for too long before adding, “After a fashion.”

The King Stag of the Forest is ancient title, one that is sunk deep in mythology, and not just in Lucitopia, which is probably why I can remember so much of it. It harkens back to the most ancient rituals of kingmaking. When I say ancient, I mean the *first* king ever to be crowned as soon as everyone stopped using grunts for language and hitting each other over the heads with rocks. A terrible thought occurs to me.

“The Dagda is not the *actual* King Stag, is he?” I ask, disbelieving.

“The one and only,” Fitspur replies in hushed tones.

I curse softly under my breath. The actual King Stag is a Stone Age god of sky and lightning. Maybe Norse, maybe Irish, probably a bit of both. Even in a world of sorcerers and magical creatures, he is myth itself. The King Stag is the first fairytale. And, supposedly, he humps like a porn star.

“Was he your king when you lived here among the elves?” I ask, trying to sound more self-assured than I feel.

Fitspur shrugs noncommittally. “He doesn’t come out often. To my knowledge, Isfin has always handled the day-to-day business of leadership for the elves. Mostly, the Dagda sleeps.”

“Ha!” I guffaw, my suspicions confirmed. He’s a deadbeat. “Should I ask him if he was having a good *nap* while Isfin was being tortured?”

“No, you bastard! You know you can’t do that!” Fitspur rails back at me, not sure if I’m kidding or not. “Look. Don’t speak unless spoken to,” he orders, but it comes out sounding like a question or a plea rather than a demand.

“I won’t,” I reply, letting it rest. “I shall be the picture of respect.”

Fitspur shakes his head at me.

“What?” I ask.

“Whatever grievance you have with the Dagda, you must put it aside, brother. Your powers are nothing compared to his. He could kill you and bring you back to life three times before you found your own ass,” Fitspur informs me.

“I don’t doubt it,” I grumble, recalling his mystical staff. One end takes life, the other restores it. “But he couldn’t seem to find Isfin,” I add incoherently in case Fitspur chooses to ignore my pointless rebellion.

Yes, I’m being petty. I’m aware of that. But Isfin is married, and I refuse to think charitably about the man-god who stole her from me centuries before I was born.

While I ponder my pending meeting with Isfin’s legendary but still deadbeat husband, I can’t help but take a second to notice the splendor around me.

The trees are thick and stately, and festooned with dewdrops of light that spiral up and around their smooth bark into the ever-farther dark of the night. The ground is lit with circles of iridescent mushrooms that glimmer and pulse as if they are oceanic things, communicating with their bioluminescence. The air is heavy with motes of sparkling pollen that drift

between the amber light from the dewdrops on the trees above and the pulsing aquatic-toned neon from the mushrooms below. It smells like apples and resin.

The lights and the trees are more than just decoration. I can see amidst the larger branches that there are dwellings woven into the living wood. It is hard to know just by looking at this arboreal city if the buildings and the walkways were made on stilts and the trees grew into them, or if the trees were carved into domiciles, with enough of themselves left alive so that the trees needn't die to make the living spaces inside them. It is a cathedral carved into and woven out of the wildwood, half polished into luxury, half left to nature.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Fitzpur says quietly. He sounds a little sad. Regretful. Homesick. I don't know. It's something complicated and not completely happy.

I turn to him. "You grew up here," I say, leaving the door open for him to continue.

He tilts his head, thinking. "I *did* grow," he decides finally. "I came into adulthood here, but it was never really my home. I was the ugly monster, always treading too heavily on their sacred soil."

I nod, still regarding his tusked profile. Here among the elves, beauty has a very narrow definition. Fitzpur's trying to put on a brave face, but I can see how deeply wounded he has been by these so-called elevated beings.

"I was always too soft," I confide. "Too tall. Too quick to laugh, like some braying ass."

Fitzpur guffaws. His eyes meet mine, and all I see there is acceptance. "You are soft," he informs me, clapping me on the shoulder.

I try to not collapse under the weight of his hand, but it's like someone dropped a side of beef on me.

"What do you mean?" I volley back, mock offended. "I've hardened up some." I flex a bicep. In truth, I've gotten shredded since I've been in Lucitopia, but I will never attain Fitzpur's girth. But, then again, professional weightlifters from our world will never attain Fitzpur's girth. He's an ogre.

Fitzpur laughs heartily at my all too human muscles and must wipe tears from his eyes. "My mother will love you," he tells me. "She always wanted

a girl. You're almost big enough to be one."

I laugh with him, and I catch the elves staring at our raucousness. Some of them look offended that we can be so jovial while Isfin lies gravely ill. They scold us with their eyes, but I know, and I suspect Fitspur does as well, that if Isfin were walking with us, she would be laughing just as heartily as we.

Not that Isfin is what some people call a guy's girl—one of those girls who laughs along with whatever sexist or insulting jokes guys tell so that she will be accepted by them. This is something different. It's gallows humor. I know from the time we spent in Asphodel's dungeon playing cards, with rushes stained with our own blood, that Isfin understands that sometimes the only way to get through difficult things is to laugh with the others who are going through it with you.

My mom and I used to search for absolutely anything to laugh about in the hospice when my dad was dying of cancer. We'd sit in the visitor's cafeteria and make up games like *if that guy were the lead singer in a band, the band's name would be...* and *what pet? Dog, cat, fish, or ferret?* There was always one ferret owner. Statistically, it's unavoidable.

Other visitors, and even the nurses sometimes, used to look at us the same way the elves are looking at Fitspur and me now. Like we're assholes. My mother and I didn't care what they thought because we couldn't. We didn't have the strength anymore. That's where Fitspur and I are right about now.

"Have you eaten yet?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "After I bring you to the Dagda."

I'm worried about Fitspur. For all the days we were in the dungeon together, neither of us were given food or drink. When Asphodel released me, I had a meal and a chance to rest that Fitspur did not have, and we've been walking a long time now. I'm exhausted. Fitspur must be approaching a hallucinatory state.

Now that I think of it, I'm pretty sure that we've walked all the way through the grove of the Sylvan Elves and beyond it. It's quiet here. There are no more of those impressive aerial buildings. The mushroom circles and glowing dewdrops are gone, leaving us to pick our way through the patterns of blue-haloed moonlight stenciling through the trees.

These are different trees, I notice, which are older and more gnarly than those in the Sylvan grove. I don't know much about botany, but I know these are oaks. In the Sylvan Grove there were several different varieties of trees, but there is nothing but oaks here. Not even one fern or shrub, just oaks and smooth-sided boulders scattered about the base of them, washed there by some extinct river. Scaly-barked branches reach out like witch's fingers, and fog seeps between the forked trunks, spilling over the moss-covered boulders like ghost honey.

"Where is the Dagda, at any rate?" I ask, trying to keep my tone light, though I'm suddenly nervous. It's cold here—a creeping cold that sneaks up your spine and unrolls carpets of shivers down your body when moments ago you were sweating.

"The cave beneath the Hanging Tree," Fitspur replies, his voice dropping low.

No need to ask which is the Hanging Tree. It stands atop a hill that has too perfect of an arc to be natural. It must be a barrow. At the base of the barrow the riot of river rocks coagulates to form a circle around what looks to be a hole in the world. A well of darkness stares back at me, like a hollow eye socket.

"That's the Dagda's cave?" I whisper. I didn't mean to whisper, but I can sense something is in there. Something I don't want to wake. Air seems to flow toward the cave, and I am pulled with it. I step forward and realize that Fitspur isn't next to me. I glance back at him.

"He asked for you. Not me. I may not enter," Fitspur replies apologetically. "Don't worry. You should be fine."

"Right," I say as evenly as I can, though I know my eyes are as wide as an owl's, and I'm standing petrified before the cave. "You go back and eat. I'll just go in, then."

"Right," Fitspur replies, his face a mask of apology. "You should be fine."

"Hum. Yes," I say, planting my hands on my hips and nodding a lot for no good reason. I glance at the cave. "I would have felt better about this if you hadn't repeated that."

"I know," Fitspur replies, as if annoyed with himself. "But really. You'll be—"

"Fine, yes," I finish for him. "You mentioned that."

Fitspur lets out a long breath. "I'm going to go," he announces.

"You should go," I agree.

"Right." Fitspur says. He turns to leave and abruptly turns back. "Don't insult him," he begs me.

"No," I rejoin quickly. "I don't think I will."

"Good, then," Fitspur says, like the matter is settled. "I'll be back to fetch you at first light."

"At first light," I repeat gamely, giving him a jaunty salute.

Fitspur goes. I watch the familiar bulk of him get erased by the closing fingers of fog. Then I turn to the cave.

Cold air sucks me toward the edge of that swallowing darkness like it's trying to breathe me in. Barrows are burial mounds. I am being pulled into a grave.

"No matter what I do, I'm going to die eventually," I whisper. Now that that's settled, I feel much better. I step into the grave and hope it doesn't become mine.

There's body odor, and then there's this.

The Dagda's funk hits me hard enough to make my eyes water. It's like mink butt mixed with yeast, with just a hint of acrid cedar smoke in the background to keep it interesting.

But it's not horrible, to tell the truth. In fact, I can't stop breathing it in, though it makes me cough a little. My mom once told me that perfume from France always had an animalistic note in it to make it more appealing. This isn't a note. It's a symphony. But still, I think I understand what she meant now. This stink is kind of heavenly.

I breathe deeply, almost forgetting to be afraid, but my skin is more sensible than my nose. It's still puckered with goosebumps. A breeze that I classify more as a *sniff* from deep within the cave pulls the last bit of warmth from me. The cave is smelling me as much as I am smelling it. I shiver enough to rattle my own bones.

The passageway recesses deep into the barrow, but it is neither high nor wide. In places I must duck down as the rough-hewn walls nearly close in around me. I can hear nothing but my own breathing. Far ahead of me, I can see the flickering glow of what I assume is firelight. I follow the light because humans are more like moths than we'd care to admit.

I've been afraid before. I've assisted Asphodel in magical rituals that divorced body from soul. I've felt the touch of evil and I've feared what it could do to me physically, but I knew no matter what evil did to my body it could never take from my soul more than I gave it. Now, I feel the touch of

something much older. Something before good and evil. I feel the clay of creation beneath my feet and there is no way I can deny it any part of me, body or soul, because it made me. It will take from me whatever it wants. It will change me however it wants.

I don't think I'm ready to not be *me* anymore.

But I keep going. So maybe I am.

The smell of cedar smoke grows more intense as the passageway bottlenecks, and then opens into a small cave. I'm not claustrophobic, but this place is closing in around me so badly I almost overlook the fact that Isfin is submerged in the cauldron of boiling water that dominates the center of the room.

"Oh shit!" I curse, diving forward.

I plunge my arms into the boiling water and lift her out without a thought. It's only after I've fallen back onto the ground with her wet body clutched to my chest that I notice I haven't been scalded. With no time to celebrate my good fortune, I turn us both over and lay her on the ground, cradling her head carefully so it doesn't smack on the packed clay.

"Isfin," I call, slapping her cheek gently.

When I get no response, I turn her head to the side, open her mouth and push my fingers in to scoop out any impediment before I start compressions on her chest. I get to thirty and close off her nose while I puff two breaths into her lungs. When my mouth closes over hers I taste Isfin's blood.

...And I relive the CPR classes I took for dad when he was still at home with us and on the ventilator. And I don't mean that I just think about the classes in flash of hyper-real memory. I'm there. I smell it. I feel the temperature of the air on my skin.

...Then, after my dad died at the hospice, I am in my paramedic training again. The constant drills. The pressure. The stress.

...I find the book. I chuck all that training aside to come here. I was a month away from graduation when I left. I'm a failure, I suppose, but I just didn't see the point in trying to save lives anymore after my mom took her own.

...No. I won't relive that. I can't.

I snap back to this reality to find that I'm doing chest compressions on Isfin. I get to thirty again, close off her nose and lean down to breathe into her mouth when a shadow covers me.

“What are you doing to my daughter?” asks a deep voice.

I practically explode off of Isfin. I scabble back, wiping her blood off my lips as I look up at the figure looming over me.

He is eight feet tall, at least, and his head nearly scrapes the top of this infernally small cave. He wears only a loincloth made of doeskin about his waist, and a taunt potbelly pokes out above the loincloth despite the rest of his lean, muscular frame. His body gleams, absent of hair, except for his shins and forearms. For some strange reason, they are covered in a thick pelt of curly, dark hair that would make a werewolf proud. Like a satyr, I suppose. He’s slightly dirty and there are strange symbols painted about his body in blue woad. His hair, which lies in ropey dreadlocks all the way down to his waist, sports the blue woad dye as well.

“You are too tall to be an *abhartach*,” he says, appraising me with a quizzical look.

No idea what an *abhartach* is. I’m too stunned by his presence to say anything but, “I’m a mage,” in a wooden tone. Hang on. Did he refer to Isfin as his daughter?

“Ah,” the Dagda says, squatting down between me and Isfin, his arms resting on his knees. “You’re not trying to drink her blood then?” he asks, as if he’s just clearing that up.

“No!” I nearly shout. I look behind him at Isfin and back at him, torn between resuscitating her and the necessity of pushing my way past him to get to her. “So, you’re her father?”

He peers at me. His eyes glint like mica in black rock. Flat and un-human. “That I am, young mage.”

His voice has an Irish lilt to it. It’s very warm and endearing. But Isfin’s just lying there behind him. Pale. Not breathing. It’s like he’s forgotten all about her and I can’t stand it.

“May I?” I ask, making a move toward her.

“You may not,” he tells me, keeping his place between me and Isfin.

“She’ll die if I—”

“She’s lost too much blood,” he interrupts, watching me closely.

“What does that mean?” I demand. “Are you saying I’m too late?”

The Dagda cocks his head at me. “Late. Early,” he repeats as if the words are of scientific interest to him. “We are *where* we are, *when* we are

there,” he adds, his brow pursed in confusion. I must admit, he is utterly alien to me.

“Is she dead?” I clarify.

“No,” he replies. He stops and reconsiders this. “Maybe a little.”

I sit up, trying to figure him out. “Fitspur brought me here to aid you. He said you asked for me.”

His face breaks into a wide smile and the alien glint in his eyes disappears. “Yes. You are just the man I was looking for, young mage.”

He suddenly grabs my head in between his hands and pulls my face far too close to his for comfort. His eyes search mine in a scanning way, as if he is downloading massive amounts of information from my retinas before releasing me abruptly.

“You are not, however, what she was looking for.” He laughs to himself, and I try not to appear too devastated.

I mean, I know I’m not ideal in any way, but her dad basically just told me I wasn’t her type. That doesn’t feel great. The Dagda’s temperament changes suddenly from borderline congenial back to alien, and a tad scary again.

“The time to pledge yourself has come. Will you help Isfin regain what was taken from her?” he demands of me.

“Yes,” I answer immediately.

No idea what I just signed myself up for, but after my gruesome tenure with Asphodel, I’ve learned that’s how these enormously powerful individuals work. Hesitation is the kiss of death. Your best bet is to answer them quickly in the affirmative and hope like hell it works out. Also, I really would help Isfin in any way if she needed me.

“Why?” he asks me.

“Because I’m a fool,” I reply honestly. “I would do anything for someone I care about, and I care about Isfin.”

“Yes, you would,” he muses, studying me. “But you have a master already, don’t you?”

I nod. “Asphodel,” I say. “I wish to renounce him.”

The Dagda laughs and slaps his knee. “If it were so easy! Can you turn from him and serve Isfin, even if you were to know *all* about him?”

“I can. And I will,” I swear.

“Ah, but you are more like him than you are like Isfin. Both of you are human and he, too, has been betrayed by one who said she loved him, though his betrayer was not his mother as yours was.”

“Asphodel and I could have everything in common from our rotten childhoods to our taste in music, but I am not *like* him,” I reply, angry that he knows both so much and so little about me.

The Dagda stares at me challengingly. I don’t back down.

“Yes. Isfin and I have always been fond of humans for this reason. You all see yourselves as being singular, and in that way, you become so. Just like her friend, Queen Jonara,” he says, smiling fondly. “I mean you no offense, young mage, but it might come in handy if you can remember how like Asphodel you are.” He turns away briskly. “That will have to do. Put her back in the cauldron.”

Thrown by how quickly he’s moved on, I look at the fire raging under the cauldron and then at Isfin, debating the Dagda’s order. The water didn’t feel hot to me before, but what if it has become hot since then?

“You want me to put her in there?” I repeat, just to waste time, I suppose.

He stands and looks down at me. His eyes have gone flat and silvery again, like a cat’s eyes in the beam of your flashlight. “In the cauldron,” he says quietly.

I sense no menace in him. I sense nothing in him, actually. I’ve never met a person or person-oid I couldn’t read before, but the Dagda has me stumped. I can’t tell if he’s trying to heal her or cook her. With that crazed look back in his eyes, either is entirely possible.

Despite my misgivings, I pick Isfin up in my arms and go to the cauldron’s edge, where I pause again.

“In,” he repeats.

I gather Isfin to me with one arm and, while staring into the Dagda’s unreadable eyes, I plunge my other arm into the water. Yes, I’m aware that I could be making hand soup for the Dagda, and I don’t care. I’d rather boil my own arm than her.

For some ungodly (or godly, considering the company) reason, the cauldron is not hot. The fire under it isn’t even all that hot. I know because I’ve got my toes in it. The water is tepid at best. But if I put her in there she could still drown. I can see the Dagda watching my every move. Maybe

he's even watching my thoughts as they play across my face, for he throws back his head and laughs.

"The water will help to make her whole again, young mage," he tells me when he's done laughing at me. "You need not fear."

I look down at Isfin in my arms. She's still motionless and her lips are blue-tinged. Everything I know about first aid tells me not to do as the Dagda asks. But I do it anyway. Not because I'm terrified of him, though I am. I do it because, though I don't know any spells that involve cauldrons because those are categorized as "witch magic" in Asphodel's estimation, there's obviously something magical going on here that I don't understand. I ease Isfin into the tepid water and let her head sink below the surface.

"That's right," the Dagda says eagerly, picking up his staff. He closes his eyes and starts to swirl Isfin around in the cauldron with his staff.

Okay. He's definitely cooking her.

I'm lunging across the mouth of the cauldron to stop him when Isfin bolts upright between us. Water sloshes over the sides as she grips the rim of the cauldron. She pauses, and then hauls in the longest breath I've ever heard. Then she pauses again, before launching into an epic coughing fit.

The Dagda cheers while Isfin sputters and fights for air. He says something to her in a lilting language that I guess is either old Irish or Middle English, and then he twirls away and stomps around the fire like the perfect heathen he is.

While the Dagda is dancing and humming to himself in an ecstasy of inner music, I pull Isfin out of the cauldron again and kneel with her on the muddy clay floor. I support her from behind, one arm wrapped around her waist, while she heaves up buckets of water. I speak to her soothingly while her body shakes with the effort to expel the liquid in her lungs.

When the last of it is out, Isfin and I sit back on our heels. She leans against me and tilts her head so that it rests on my shoulder.

"Ramsay?" she whispers, as if becoming aware of her surroundings.

"I'm here," I reply. She touches her cheek to mine. She might be smiling.

The Dagda dances into a corner of the cave and puts an enormous golden harp to his chest. He begins to pluck the strings, and an orchestra of sound comes out of one instrument. It's equal parts joy and sadness, and it fills my head until I am compelled to get up and move.

To my surprise, Isfin gets up with me. Though her legs are still unsteady, she seems to feel the same compunction that I do. She begins to dance around the fire with closed eyes, which is unwise in her condition. She should not be dancing. And there is a part of my brain that keeps alerting me to this fact, but a much larger part is too busy looking at the pretty flashing lights the music makes when it pulses through the air. For some reason it is completely normal for me to be able to see music right now.

I don't know how long we're dancing. A few minutes, or a year. Time goes away. All I see is Isfin. Her arms undulate like silk banners in the wind. Her back arches and rolls over her swaying hips like she's making love. Her laughter echoes around the cave. Music pulses inside my chest like a second heart. Everything is spinning. My sight is blurred by fire light. I feel myself laughing as I spin and spin around the cauldron and Isfin's face—her radiant face. Her smile shines brighter than the gold on the Dagda's harp.

Then, Isfin is in my arms, pressing against my body. I smell the wet earth and burnt ash of the fire as I lay her down under me. Her mouth pulls on mine as her legs wrap around me, holding me. She tastes like lilacs.

Movement, like the ocean. I am a wave, rising high, catching air and light as my edges turn into prisms in one moment of flashing exultation. Then I crash against her shore. We mix, becoming bubbling sand that sizzles as it spreads out in circles.

I hear her sigh my name as she quenches me.

It's not like I've never woken up in a strange place with a strange girl sprawled across my chest before. But this morning the place in question is a burial mound, and the girl in question is an elf. So, not your typical morning after. I'm not even hung over.

Here's what I know. I know that it's nearly dawn. I know that we are lying beneath the Hanging Tree on the crest of the barrow hill. I know that Isfin is alive and sleeping peacefully. And I know that I have an erection the size of a circus tent pole.

What I *don't* know is how we got here, or how we are both completely clean if we were rolling around on the muddy floor of the Dagda's cave last night. I'm also curious about the intense stinging sensation that goes all the way around both my forearms, but I haven't looked at them because I don't want to move and wake Isfin yet. For now, I just want to hold her and marvel at how perfectly she fits against me.

And, speaking of Isfin, the final thing that I don't know is whether she and I had sex or not. This last little detail is troubling me the most, as you can imagine.

I remember dancing. More like raving, actually. I remember an abusive amount of harp music. I remember kissing Isfin and how she grabbed the hair on the back of my head while she slid her hips against mine—hence the tentpole erection. But no matter how hard I try to piece all the wildly suggestive images that I have about last night together, I can't remember physically having sex with her. And I don't know if that's a good thing, because it means it didn't happen, or if it's utterly reprehensible, because it means I did something that shouldn't be done by a guy when he's out of control.

Isfin suddenly twitches herself awake rather violently. Luckily, she knees me in the balls a bit as she does so. I say luckily because the gut-clenching pain of getting my balls grazed deflates my erection enough that I can at least sit up without my penis bobbing between us like a pornographic puppet. Can't help groaning, though, as I lurch up to grab my crotch. She knows instantly what she's done.

"Sorry!" Isfin says, cringing. She reaches out as if to help me soothe my balls, thinks better of it, and covers her grinning mouth instead. "Are you alright? I'm so sorry. I was startled, is all. I'm not in the habit of waking with someone else."

"It's fine. No problem. Everything is fine," I wheeze, rocking back and forth while the pain gets worse and worse and then settles down.

She's trying not to laugh, and from the genuine ease I see in her demeanor toward me, I know that at least I didn't do anything last night that she did not want. That's a relief. I still don't remember what happened, and I am angry with myself for that. I'm angry with her for probably knowing. I'm angry with her dad for that effing harp music.

Mostly, though, I'm angry with myself for something I haven't pinpointed yet. Before I can name it, I'm distracted by the blue ink and blood covering my wrists and partway up my forearms.

Oh *hell*, no.

I hold up my wrists. They are completely wrapped in two and a half inch thick tattoos that are part Celtic knot and part writing—I think, anyway. It's difficult to tell because the letters are artistically attenuated and written in a language I don't understand. Also, the knots aren't really knots. Upon further inspection, I realize they are serpents who are eating themselves, and for a nauseating moment it seems to me that they writhe under my skin as if they are alive. I must still be high on harp music.

"The Ouroboros," Isfin whispers reverently, gaping at my new tattoos.

"What the f—" I trail off, grimacing at my unasked-for and unsettling tattoos. Isfin notices that I am, quite understandably in my opinion, pissed off about this.

"It's a great honor," she informs me, blushing. "My father hasn't given anyone the Ouroboros since—well. For a millennium."

"I still would have liked to have been asked!" I fume. I mean, damn. Who gives someone else a tattoo when that person is passed out? I don't even understand what they mean. Which leads me to my next question. "What if I don't like what this symbolizes?"

Her lips tighten in annoyance, and I realize that I'm focusing on the wrong thing. I honestly don't know why I'm acting like I care more about these tattoos than I do about her. But before I can think of how to start over, Isfin stands abruptly and starts stalking angrily for the edge of the barrow hill.

"Wait!" I call out as I jump up and chase after her.

She spins around to yell at me, her eyes glistening. "The Ouroboros is a gift of life and power, but you are ignorant of the deeper mysteries! You know nothing but the soul-sapping spells that Asphodel has taught you!"

For some reason, hearing her say Asphodel's name fires me up. Why is she always thinking of him?

"You say you despise Asphodel, yet the mention of him brings you to tears," I shoot back at her accusingly. "Did you ever wake up with him on top of this hill?"

Isfin's jaw drops. Oh crap. That was, without a doubt, the wrong thing to say. Why am I baiting her?

"When he was made my champion, I was a *child!*" She turns away from me but thinks better of leaving and turns back to yell at me some more. "My father slept for three years, and the Unseelie banded against me while I was still too young to take the throne. They had me imprisoned. They were going to execute me, but Asphodel came to my rescue."

I'm pretty sure I saw that rescue in Isfin's blood. And I know of the Seelie and Unseelie Courts through my fascination with fairy tales in general before I came to Lucitopia. In a nutshell, the Seelie Court are all the pretty, smart, and "good" elves. The Unseelie Court are the dark, cruel, and somewhat less attractive magical beings—sometimes the term "beings" includes both elves and other creatures that are like ogres and trolls, sometimes it does not, depending on your source material.

Again, this is one of those places where our dear author seems to have taken some liberties, because I remember Norse rock trolls and ogres in Asphodel's memory of the battle outside Isfin's tower. I guess the author has decided to call all these darker mythological creatures "Unseelie", although that's a loose definition of the standard interpretation of the Unseelie Court. But I digress.

"He raised an army for me, though he faced nearly insurmountable odds," Isfin continues. "He is the reason I am queen. He's the reason I'm alive at all." Here she stops to collect herself. Then she chuffs, as if annoyed with herself for becoming so emotional. "I don't need to explain myself to you simply because we—" here she stops.

"We what?" I ask her. I'm trying to sound calm instead of panicked like I really feel, but unfortunately, I end up sounding like a cold bastard. "What did we do?"

Isfin's eyes widen with shock. Shit. That was the wrong thing to ask, or at least the wrong thing to ask in such a derisive tone.

She makes a disgusted sound as she turns away from me and starts galloping down the side of the steep barrow hill.

How did this get so incredibly bad so fast? Not five minutes ago I was holding her. Last night I helped save her life and, though I'm still not entirely sure what happened, there's a possibility I made love to her. Or maybe not. Maybe she's offended because I am insinuating that we had sex

when I didn't. But I know something happened, at least. She kissed me. She wanted me. Now I'm just some asshole on top of a hill that she's rightly running away from because I'm treating her like garbage. What is *wrong* with me?

"Isfin! I'm sorry!" I call after her, but my lame attempt to right things with her is curtailed.

"Ho there, Ramsay! Did you survive the night?" bellows Fitspur from the bottom of the barrow hill. He's right on time when I would give just about anything for him to be ten minutes late. As I descend, I hear him hailing Isfin with all the gallantry that I lack.

"Your majesty. How happy I am to see you revived," he rejoices.

I join them in time to see Isfin and Fitspur take hands and lean fondly toward each other. It's not quite hugging, which is only reserved for family here in Lucitopia, but it is about as close to hugging as high-born people like Isfin and Fitspur ever get. In fact, for these two, it's like they're crawling all over each other.

I hate being jealous, but it's like my insides have been lit on fire. I can't seem to control myself or anything I feel around her. I certainly can't control the fact that no matter how hard I try to drive her away I've obviously fallen madly in love with her. Fitspur notices my presence and reaches out to grasp my hand, and pull me into the happy circle of his and Isfin's reunion.

"And how are you, brother?" he asks me seriously.

He's so warm and full of goodness, how could anyone hate him? All my jealousy is discarded in an instant, and I give Fitspur a rueful laugh.

"It was a colorful experience," I reply holding up a wrist so he can see my tattoos.

The genuine awe I see break across his face only underscores how wrong I was to complain about the Ouroboros to Isfin. Fitspur touches my arm with reverence and looks up at me with widened eyes. He glances at Isfin and back at me as if weighing us both.

"You saved her majesty's life, then?" he guesses.

"The Dagda saved her life. I merely carried her about from place to place at his command," I reply, refusing to take credit.

"But he named you her champion," Fitspur replies, confused, as he gestures to my tattoos.

I look down at them again, getting the unsettling feeling that they are alive. Is *that* what they mean? That I am Isfin's champion?

"My father has secured the mage's oath, but I have not yet named him my champion," Isfin corrects before I can say something that matches the stupidity of my heretofore unforgivable behavior. I notice that she's calling me "the mage" and not the more familiar "Ramsay." Fitspur notices that little detail too.

He looks between us, becoming increasingly uncomfortable. "You have rejected him, then?" Fitspur asks Isfin. He looks at me with a pitying expression.

Isfin pretends not to hear his questions. "I wish to be taken to Captain Meomi immediately," she commands. "We have much to discuss, Prince Fitspur, if we are to retrieve Calx from the Isle of Avalon."

"Yes, your majesty," Fitspur replies, bowing to Isfin as she takes her leave of us.

We trail behind her. Fitspur slows our pace until he may speak to me without Isfin overhearing us.

"What *happened* last night?" he hisses, his eyes blazing.

I nearly laugh aloud at the irony of Fitspur's question, but it isn't funny to me. I watch Isfin glide away from me with a sinking feeling, like I've lost her just as I've realized that I could have had her to begin with.

"I wish I knew," I reply.

We are silent the whole way back to the Grove of the Sylvan Elves.

As soon as we enter the Grove of the Sylvan Elves, Captain Meomi and the remaining Elytra close around Isfin like the carapace for which they are named.

Before they can seal themselves off from the world, Isfin pushes her way out from their armed ranks to wave Fitspur to her. I stand there like a jackass. When she keeps waving for someone to come to her after Fitspur has already done so, I realize that she's waving at me.

After the way I treated her this morning I didn't think she would ever want me close to her again. While I'm still processing this with what is most likely a ridiculous look on my face, she reaches out between the brawny shoulders of the Elytra with a frustrated growl and pulls me into the huddle.

The "huddle" takes me a moment to process because I believe the women of the Elytra have grown taller. The iridescent green shoulder plates of their armor easily curve over our heads, and there are no gaps between them all the way down to the ground, which is both anatomically impossible and very cool.

"Captain Meomi, we haven't much time to catch you up, so I will be brief," Isfin says hurriedly. "The Dagda has seen fit to grace Ramsay with the Ouroboros."

"Majesty," Meomi gasps. I suddenly find my forearms of much interest among the Elytra.

Isfin holds up a hand to stifle any forthcoming questions. “I fear Lord Tantagel will feel much betrayed by this,” she adds.

“You mean Tantagel, King of the Sylvan Elves, as he now wishes to be called?” Meomi says out of the side of her mouth.

“Since when?” Isfin shoots back, shocked.

“Since you were taken by Asphodel,” Meomi replies.

“That little...!” Isfin stops short of cursing, though I suspect she would have said something adorable like, *that little titmouse*, or *somesuch*. “How dare he?” she demands, seething.

“He argues that the woods are all that is left of the kingdom of elves since Avalon was lost in the Great Betrayal,” Meomi replies respectfully. “As he is High Lord of the Wood, he deserves the title of King. Or so he insists. The Marsh Elves disagree, of course.”

“He can’t create a throne simply because he craves one,” Fitspur says, smirking with disgust. He glances at Isfin. “I fear this is retribution for your refusal to marry him and make him a true king, your majesty.”

“I believe you’re right, Prince Fitspur,” she replies, smiling ruefully. “Yet Tantagel’s overly ambitious move to reseal the throne of the elves does no more to force my hand than has already been done. Asphodel has emerged from the Blank Zone changed, yet again. But this time his target is the elves, and Tantagel is ill prepared to deal with him.”

Isfin’s eyes flicker up to mine and I have no idea what is written in them. While I’m grasping at straws and wondering what she wants from me, she looks away and squares her shoulders. Whatever it was, I missed it.

“The time has come for me to return to Avalon,” she says in a low voice.

“Majesty—” Meomi begins on a sigh, as if they’ve had this argument before.

“The Dagda agrees. It is *time*,” Isfin says gravely, halting any dissent. “Calx is on Avalon. We must reclaim it if we are to have any hope of killing Asphodel.”

All eyes turn to me, though I have no idea why.

“As you say, your majesty. To Avalon,” Meomi replies quietly.

I sense some heavy emotion pass around the circle of the Elytra—something that lands between reluctance and hunger. It’s homesickness, I realize, but burdened by something else. Maybe it’s the knowledge that

their home no longer exists as they remember it. Unfortunately, I know that feeling too well.

“Tantagel and the elven host await outside our circle. He is demanding an audience with you,” Meomi continues, pointedly refusing to grant *Lord Tantagel* any honorific. Even I know that’s a huge burn.

“Open ranks, Captain,” Isfin says, planting her feet and tipping down her chin in a look that is both steely and breathtakingly sexy. Not that it matters how sexy she is to me. Because I’m a dink and I blew it.

The Elytra fan out into a line behind Isfin, Fitspur, and me. While they do, they seem to shrink back into semi-normal human proportions. They’re still tall, gorgeous, physically superior women in every shade, from lily white to deepest ebony, but they are mostly human apart from that.

“Queen Isfin,” enthuses a gorgeous, graceful male elf with long snow-white hair as he steps out from a large group of svelte elves.

Some of the elves wear sliver, some green, some red, and some are wearing a mix of pastels—but the pastel elves are standing in the back. Lord Tantagel wears a blue silk tunic that is covered by silver chainmail. His attire moves over his lithe frame to perfection as he steps forward, his blue eyes sparkling with relieved tears. He is beautiful and elegant, so of course I hate him instantly.

“We are overjoyed to see you recovered, my queen,” he continues, bending the knee before Isfin.

“Tell me, Lord Tantagel. Do you speak for others present, or do you invoke the Royal We to express your joy?” Isfin replies archly.

Tantagel’s eyes shift to the left uncomfortably, and then back to Queen Isfin as if he wants to weigh the reaction of the other elves gathered, but does not wish to be seen doing so.

He stands erect to respond to her. “I speak for all the elves, surely, when I say that I am relieved to see you well again.”

“Speaking for all the elves is *my* honor, Lord Tantagel, not yours,” she reminds him harshly.

There are several suppressed titters from the elvan host, and more than a few breaths that are held in suspense as everyone watches Isfin serve Tantagel his smackdown sandwich with extra humble sauce.

Tantagel wisely decides there is nothing he can say to rectify the situation between he and Isfin, and bows low before her. “As you say, your

majesty,” he replies contritely.

It is while Tantagel is bent in half, taking that spanking, that the elvan host begins to murmur behind him. I hear *Ouroboros* whispered, and see Tantagel’s eyes snap up to mine, then down to my forearms in shock, and then back up to my face again. A face, it now seems, that Lord Tantagel wants to punch.

He rises and moves toward Isfin as if to confer with her privately. Out of the corner of my eye I see Fitspur take a step closer to Isfin’s right, and without question I mirror his action to her left so that the three of us are nearly shoulder to shoulder.

“What is the meaning of this?” Tantagel asks Isfin quietly, as if oblivious to our presence.

At this proximity, I can see the flash of familiarity in the way Tantagel and Isfin regard one another. They have known each other for a long time, and their relationship has obviously spanned more iterations than the queen/subject one I see playing out now. They were close once. Closer than I can claim she and I have ever been.

“My father saw fit to give him the *Ouroboros*. What more meaning can I give you than that?” she responds.

“Did you influence the *Dagda*?” Tantagel asks accusingly.

Isfin looks taken aback. “I was dead—mostly—when the *Dagda* made his choice. I was not consulted in any way,” she replies, offended.

This appears to placate Tantagel’s anger to some extent, though he glances at me again as if I were a wet spot on a hotel mattress.

“Is he to be your champion, then?” Tantagel asks.

“No,” Isfin replies. “I have chosen someone else to be my champion, though Ramsay the Mage will be my merlin.”

Isfin makes a slight gesture in Fitspur’s direction, surprising both Fitspur and Tantagel. And me. Did she just call me her merlin? And didn’t it sound like a title, rather than a name?

Tantagel looks at Fitspur and does not even try to mask his shock. “After all these years of your father withholding the *Ouroboros* from much more suitable candidates,” his haughty sneer leads me to believe that he was one of those candidates, “yet, you do not accept his choice. You choose the *ogre* to be your champion?”

While Tantagel huffs in disgust, Fitspur turns about to face Isfin and falls to his knees under the weight of the honor she has bestowed upon him.

“Your majesty, I am not worthy of this,” Fitspur says in voice made husky with humility.

See, this is why I love this guy. He understands the occasion. He’s been chosen the Champion of the Elf Queen, and he is ogre enough to get emotional about it. He’s the real thing. But it appears Tantagel agrees with Fitspur’s negative assessment of himself, rather than mine or Isfin’s.

“Accepting another human would have been bad enough, but you cannot take an ogre for your champion, Isfin,” Tantagel insists. He straightens his spine and looks down his pert nose at her. “He is one of the Unseelie, or have you forgotten how they took Avalon away from us?”

“From *me*, Lord Tantagel,” Isfin corrects. “They took Avalon away from me.”

“Here you are wrong, your majesty,” Tantagel nearly shouts back at her. “The longer the Unseelie hold Avalon, the weaker *all* the Seelie become. They sap our power from the sacred ground of Avalon and every day the elves grow closer to a mortal death. Your faith in the lesser folk when you took Asphodel as your champion those many years ago has cost all the elves. And now you make our enemy your champion for a second time?”

“Prince Fitspur is not our enemy!” Isfin shouts back. “He is pure of heart, and he has done nothing but try to preserve our way of life. Yet, you would call him lesser because he has green skin and tusks?”

“I call him lesser because his is Unseelie!” Tantagel rages. “All the ogres are Unseelie, and they stood against you in the Great Betrayal!”

“*Centuries* ago, his ancestors stood against me. This particular ogre would *die* for me,” Isfin says, throwing up her hands, and facing the elvan host to make her plea. “Why is it that the elves are given such long lives if we stop learning after the first few decades? The Battle of Betrayal happened long ago. We are the Timekeepers for all beings. We cannot stay frozen in one time simply because we are angry about it,” she argues in a balanced tone to the elvan host. They listen, but with reserved expressions.

“The ogres are no longer aligned with Asphodel—in fact, they die by his hand every day. While we, the elves, do not. It is Asphodel we must defeat if we are to stop the senseless slaughter of other magical folk, and it is Asphodel we must defeat to regain Avalon. With this logic, why

shouldn't Prince Fitspur be my champion? He has lost half his tribe to fuel Asphodel's spells." She gazes at Fitspur and smiles in a gentle way that kills me. "Have *you* lost as much as he has, Lord Tantagel?"

Tantagel backs away from Isfin, looking like he's chewing something sour. "What I have lost is Avalon. And what I know, and that you have apparently forgotten, is that the Unseelie cannot be trusted."

I feel someone at my back, and realize it is Meomi. All the Elytra have moved closer to our little threesome and they are as tense as wound coils. I feel Meomi prod me with her elbow.

"Bolster her argument, mage," she grows in my ear. "You're her merlin now."

Okay, so this whole bit about me being the merlin was never discussed. I also don't like how I was passed over as a candidate for the champion thing, although to be honest, I'd probably pick Fitspur over me when it came to physical combat. Still. It stings a little, because from what I can gather, the Dagda chose me to be her champion and she sidestepped that choice and made me merlin, though after the way I treated her this morning, I can't say I blame her. And being merlin was what I always wanted. Wasn't it?

"How do I assist her?" I whisper back, frantically. "That was a very fine speech she just gave, and it doesn't appear to have worked."

Even I can see that Isfin's progressive stance on ogres have alienated more than a few of the elvan host. Isfin no longer has a home of her own, and if no sanctuary is given here in the Grove of the Sylvan Elves, Isfin stands to lose much more than just her throne. I have no doubt that Asphodel is pursuing her. If Isfin doesn't have a loyal army to protect her, he will have her again, and whether I'm her champion, or merlin, or back-up dancer for crying out loud, I cannot allow that.

"Tell them how you are going to kill Asphodel—that's what they want to hear," Meomi hisses back. "And make a big show of it with your magic."

I mumble something profane under my breath as I step forward. I hate standing in front of people so that they may see all of me. It's a knee-jerk reaction from having been a tall, pudgy boy. I am not that anymore. I take a deep breath.

"Last night the Dagda charged me to help her majesty regain what she had lost, and I swore to do so," I say in my best stage voice.

A dark-skinned, dreadlocked elf in a shimmering red robe glides forward and asks, “How do you intend to do this, young Ramsay the Mage? Asphodel has ensorcelled the Isle of Avalon, and he has set his most vicious Enthra about it, so that none may even come close to its shores.”

The Enthra? No idea what those are, but now is not the time to admit ignorance. I bow to the red-robed elf in deference.

“Might I inquire your name?” I ask.

“I am Lady Pendaris, ruler of the Marsh Elves,” she informs me with an indulgent smile, like she’s telling me if I’m going to be shooting my mouth off about my close, personal relationship with the Dagda, I should probably already know that.

“Lady Pendaris,” I say, and bow again for good measure. I stand erect and look her in the eye. “I was Asphodel’s apprentice. I know of no other to have ever held this title, and as such there is none who is more prepared to meet his sorcery than I,” I reply, bluffing the bejeezus out of this. “I can break his spells. Your queen has seen me do so.”

I gesture back to Isfin for confirmation.

“He has,” she replies, backing me up. “Ramsay broke a spell Asphodel had woven from his own words and breath to imprison me. Then Ramsay used his knowledge of the Ebon Spire and its inner workings to see to it that he, Prince Fitspur, and I escaped.”

The elvan host gasps and murmur amongst themselves before settling down and looking back on me with expectant eyes. I glance at Fitspur. He shrugs imperceptibly, telling me we’re out of his depth.

“You are not the only one to have ever been Asphodel’s apprentice,” Lady Pendaris tells me with a smile. I am thrown, but she gives me no opportunity to question her about this. “Though I do believe that you are the only one to have ever escaped from his dungeon,” she continues while she turns from me to look at Lord Tantagel.

Tantagel and the other sliver-blue clad elves hold their tongues, while the elves wearing either green or red murmur amongst themselves in what I hope is the sound of being generally impressed. When they quiet down, all eyes turn to me again. I have no idea what to say, but all my chips are on the table, and I can’t back out now. I can only double down.

“I swore an oath to the Dagda,” I continue solemnly, “and if I do nothing else, I will see the queen and her champion safely onto the Isle of

Avalon where they will retrieve Calx, the one weapon that can kill Asphodel. The rest is up to Prince Fitspur, and I have no doubt he will be victorious.”

Okay, that was stretching it a bit. But if there’s one thing I know about poker, it’s that when you’re bluffing, if you crack, you’ll lose. I stand my ground and hold Lady Pendaris’ gaze with a confidence that borders on insanity. She suddenly huffs and breaks into a knowing smile.

“You’ll make a good Merlin,” she tells me in a way that makes me think “Merlin” might be another way of saying “sparkly bullshitter.” Then she turns to Isfin. “Majesty, you have the right to choose whatever champion you see fit. The Marsh Elves will support your choice, and we will aid you in your endeavor to recapture Avalon.”

The genuine relief breaking across Isfin’s face at Lady Pendaris’ pledge is curtailed by a swell of murmuring from the Sylvan Elves. I can’t make out what they’re saying, but even I can tell that there is enough dissent among Lord Tantagel’s subjects that he is forced to step forward and face all the elvan host with arms raised to make a statement.

“We, too, are in support of re-claiming Avalon,” Tantagel announces placatingly. “After all, what choice have we? Whether we stand and fight with her majesty or not, a mortal end awaits us all in a few short decades if we do not reclaim our homeland.” He turns and bows to Isfin. “The Sylvan Elves will aid you in recapturing Avalon as well, Queen Isfin.”

Fitspur and I shoot each other a look at Tantagel’s begrudging support for Isfin. The leaders of the other, smaller elvan factions—Hedgerows in green, Gardens in pink, and Crossroads in yellow and orange—step forward to pledge assistance with varying degrees of enthusiasm. While Isfin is accepting the pledges of these lesser elves, Fitspur and I meet up a few paces behind her. Captain Meomi falls back slightly to join us as well.

“Do you think Tantagel’s a problem?” I ask quickly, for I see Lady Pendaris making a bee line for us.

Meomi replies, “I think he has already done his best to undermine her majesty and lost. The majority of Sylvan elves are with her, regardless of what Tantagel wants.”

Lady Pendaris joins us as Meomi finishes speaking. “You’re looking terrible, daughter,” she says candidly.

Meomi weathers her mother's disapproval with a suppressed sigh. "Yes, well, it's been rather a trying week," she remarks drily. Lady Pendaris decides to ignore her and instead turns her piercing gaze on me.

"You're a new face," she says, studying me with enjoyment. "It's about time that old goat brought some fresh blood into the fold."

I'm still stunned enough over the revelation that Meomi is the daughter of the Lady of the Marsh to be slightly confused. She can't be calling Isfin an old goat, can she? By the time I figure out that she meant the Dagda, she's already fondly greeting Fitspur. She clasps both his wrists while he clasps both of hers and they touch foreheads, which is adorable because Fitspur must bend nearly in half to reach her.

"My lady," he says, baring his impressive tusks in a wide smile. "It warms my heart to see you again."

"Oh, sweet child," she says dotingly. Meomi only rolls her eyes a little at her mother's obvious favoritism. "You've been sorely missed in the Grove and in the Marsh. How goes it with your people?" she asks concernedly.

Fitspur's face falls. "Ill, I'm afraid. Many have been taken by Asphodel." Here, he pauses to chuckle through an emerald blush. "Myself included. I would have died were it not for Ramsay."

He claps me on the shoulder, and my knees nearly buckle. I allow myself to visibly struggle and say, "Yes, well, I thought I might need a battering ram to escape my former master, and I found nothing strong enough for the job other than Prince Fitspur."

Lady Pendaris doesn't quite laugh, but it looks like she wants to. From such a flinty woman, I take that as a compliment. Her eyes narrow as she regards me.

"Yes, Asphodel's apprentice, and the first to wear the Ouroboros *since* him. I am most interested in your story, young mage," she says musingly. "How came you to be so favored by both Asphodel and the Dagda?"

Perfectly sensible question. I've never really considered an answer for why so many landmark things should happen to a doofus like me. I can't exactly say *because this is a story and I'm the hero and, by the way, you're all fictional characters* because that would mean I would have to stay in Lucitopia forever, and I'm either dead or out of here in less than two weeks. Although, I don't feel excited about either of those options right now.

What's wrong with me? Did I get thumped on the head in the Dagda's cave? Since I'd been in Lucitopia for about a minute I've wished for nothing but to get the hell out of here, yet suddenly that option isn't as appealing as it used to be.

And what's this about being the first to wear the Ouroboros since Asphodel? And about him being her champion? I look at Isfin, still engaged with the elves of the Crossroads, and I stammer for a moment. She should have told me that. Though, I suppose I didn't give her much of a chance to tell me anything this morning.

"It's a long story, really," I equivocate.

"Are you his son?" Lady Pendaris asks bluntly.

"Mother!" Meomi exclaims.

"Whose? Asphodel's?" I ask, talking over Meomi. "Oh, certainly not! I loathe him."

"It's perfectly normal to loathe your parents," Lady Pendaris says as she glances at her daughter.

The first impression Isfin had of me when she found out I was Asphodel's apprentice was that I was also his spy, and now Lady Pendaris assumes I'm his son and, therefore, probably a spy. I need to drive a stake through the heart of this rumor, or it will come back and suck the life out of me—and Fitzpur and Isfin. The three of us are tied to each other now, and as such, I cannot permit any shadow of doubt upon my honor to persist, or our quest to regain Avalon and subsequently kill Asphodel are all but lost.

"I assure you, Lady Pendaris, Asphodel is not my father, nor is he anything like a father to me," I say.

I think about the past year as I speak. How I was never good enough, never what I wanted to be, and never what he wanted me to be, either, and I'm startled by the thought that though I am in another world, I am still in the same place I was before I came here.

"He was my master, and he taught me—*drove* me like an animal, is more like it. Every hour he demanded that I learn a new spell, and every day that I pass a new test. If I succeeded, the next day he would question me about something he hadn't taught me, but that he expected me to know anyway. He set impossible goals, and when I failed, he made me feel guilty for the fact that he had to punish me." I laugh because it isn't funny. It's too painful to say without making a joke of it. I cared what he thought about

me, and I wanted to please him. It galls me to even think that. “I am the farthest thing from a son to him as can be imagined.”

Lady Pendaris’ eyes dance over to Meomi’s stoic face.

“I think you’ve described some parent-child relationships perfectly, young mage,” she says in a subdued tone, as if she’d heard everything I didn’t say to her. “But I believe you when you say you are not his son. Hopefully, all you have learned can be used to save many lives, though the last year of yours seems to have been sacrificed.”

As Lady Pendaris takes her leave, I notice that Isfin has joined us and that she is staring at me. I wonder how much of my little diatribe she heard.

“So. That’s my mother,” Meomi says dryly, breaking the tension.

Fitspur snorts a laugh, and I can’t help it. None of us can. Isfin, Meomi, me—we all start laughing, although we know this not the right time or place for such an outburst. Gallows humor again, because the four of us are as good as hung.

This evening there is to be a party. I want to get the hell out of here, but Fitzpur and Meomi assure me that leaving right away is neither wise nor possible.

“We need to wait for the reinforcements to arrive before we try an assault on Avalon,” Isfin says without meeting my eyes. She’s avoiding me. “In the meantime, Lord Tantagel has declared that there should be a feast in honor of my new champion. And in honor of you, Ramsay. It is important that you both get the ceremony you deserve.”

I pace outside Isfin’s doorway while, inside her borrowed rooms high up in the canopy of the Sylvan Grove, members of the Elytra act as her attendants. They are holding up gowns and jewels for her selection, while I plead my case for our immediate departure.

“Remove all the blue ones,” she tells the Elytra with an annoyed flick of her hair. “Is there nothing in white and gold?”

“Nothing, your majesty,” one of the Elytra says with a low bow.

Isfin snorts in disgust. “Why would he offer me *my* colors to wear?” she mumbles, grinding her teeth slightly. I assume Tantagel is the “he” she is referring to.

“Can’t find anything suitable?” I say cheerfully. “Maybe it’s best we just go then? Seeing as how Asphodel is most certainly chasing you.”

Isfin turns to me, rolling her eyes. “Ramsay,” she says testily. “There is no safer place for me to be than here in the Grove. And this feast is a necessity for you. It legitimizes your place in the Seely court.”

I cross my arms and let out a long, frustrated breath as Isfin stands in front of a full-length mirror, pressing a red gown to her body. I can't seem to find the words I need to describe my...what was it? A hallucination? Vision? Whatever it was when I seemed to be on a blank page with some part of Asphodel that was screaming. My internal description of him as a smudge just doesn't have the gravitas necessary to convey how much danger I believe we are in right now.

"Can't I be legitimized as we ride out? A moving feast, maybe?" I try.

Isfin laughs, and the sparkling sound loosens a knot that has been in my chest all day. At least I can still make her laugh. She meets my eyes for the first time since this morning under the Hanging Tree, when I ruined everything.

"Will you try to be civil tonight?" she asks me. "Though I know you don't place much importance on hierarchy, the elves will not follow you if you are not granted a formal title before them. Tonight, you will be made Merlin. It's very important."

There it is again. The thing I wanted so desperately, dangled in front of me. When I think that word in my head, it's like a huge stadium packed with tens of thousands of people whispering *Merlin* at the same time. It still matters to me, I suppose, but there are currently things I want more. For instance, I'd much rather storm into this room, banish the Elytra, and throw Isfin onto the bed I see against the far wall. It annoys me to think I may have already done something like that, but I can't remember.

"Must I be civil to Tantagel?" I grouse, still angry about last night. And this morning. And my general idiocy with all things Isfin related.

"Yes, you must be civil to him." she exclaims, throwing the dress onto the bed.

Rose petals rustle upon the silk sheets. I can smell their scent mixed with Isfin's from the doorway, and it's not helping my mood.

"And you must call him *Lord* Tantagel, even in private," she scolds. "You're just as bad as my father."

"As I notice he isn't here, I'd be more like him if I could. I imagine *Lord* Tantagel finds the Dagda most uncivil," I grumble. "Like an embarrassing grandfather who won't wear pants anymore."

She's trying not to laugh. "Please wear pants tonight."

“If I must,” I reply, sighing. She and I smile at each other. A lump of all the things I want to say to her forms in my throat. I clear it and continue. “As long as we leave directly after the feast, I will be as civil as you require, my queen.”

She gives me a strange look. “Am I your queen? You are human and have sworn no fealty to me,” she says, sounding surprised.

“Yet, swear I did.” Half my mouth ticks up in a smile. “You were too busy being cooked by your father at the time to notice.”

“I did not hear you swear,” she says, refusing to joke with me. “Am I your queen?”

I meet the pull of her eyes and feel the full weight that her presence takes up in my mind. Oh, hell yes. She’s my queen.

“You are. Though I haven’t treated you as such. I’ve been punishing you for something someone else did to me,” I admit quietly. “I’ve behaved like a fool, and I’m sorry.”

I’m cupping her face in my hands. I guess I’ve entered her room—which I was expressly told I was not allowed to do—and I’m touching her—which I’m sure I’m extra not allowed to do. But to me it’s the only correct way to be with Isfin. I was meant to be close to her.

I feel again that shock throughout my body that I experienced as soon as I touched her in Asphodel’s dungeon, but it’s not painful anymore. It feeds me. I see the tattoos on my wrists writhe as if given life. I feel Isfin hands on my chest, but they aren’t pushing me away. She’s looking up at me with her lips parted, expectantly. I bend my head down to hers...

And find a knife at my throat.

“You will unhand her majesty, sorcerer,” one of her Elytra demands. She’s not messing around, either.

I hold up my hands. “Unhanded,” I say. Is my voice always that high? “And I’m a mage, not a sorcerer,” I correct.

I glance at the feisty little Elytra. I’ve never heard any of them other than Meomi speak. She’s the smallest Elytra in her natural size, but she’s got to be one of the fastest. I didn’t even see her move across the room. She also looks a lot like Pocahontas, which is oddly exhilarating. Being held at knife point by a Disney princess was a childhood fantasy of mine. And, yes, I do realize that’s bizarre. But then again, I did willingly become a character

in *Lucitopia*, so my tolerance for bizarre things is a bit higher than most people's. Now, back to Pocahontas and her knife nipping at my jugular.

"Mage or sorcerer, your touch still calls out her essence. Now step back," Pocahontas orders.

"Stepping back." I take a giant leap away from Isfin. "Did I hurt you?" I ask, worried. It was just yesterday I took too much of Isfin's essence (as Pocahontas called it) from her, and nearly killed her.

"No," she replies, giving me a cryptic smile. "Hurt is the wrong word entirely."

"You may go now, mage. Her majesty will see you at the feast tonight," Pocahontas announces with frosty amusement.

There are now half a dozen swords pointed at me. I bow and take my leave.

"My queen," I say, smiling, as I right myself and go. I think Isfin smiles back at me.

On my way down the lacquered staircase that wraps around the trunk of the great tree that houses Isfin's room, I run into Fitspur on his way up.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, surprised.

"Trying to talk Isfin into leaving," I reply, feeling like I was caught doing something I shouldn't.

"Oh." Fitspur looks thrown. "You know we can't leave without the reinforcements," he says.

"That's what she said," I reply. We stand there and stare at each other for too long. "What are *you* doing here?" I ask.

"Nothing," he replies. Then he shrugs, and adds, "looking for you," but I get the feeling he's not being honest.

"Oh." I start down the staircase again, but when he seems reluctant to descend, I say, "Well, lead on. You've got to help me prepare for this ridiculous feast. Isfin is worried I'm going to be uncivil."

"Right," he says, suddenly switching gears. His tusks gleam at me when he flashes a smile. "Though, if it's manners she wishes you to learn, I might be the wrong teacher. I am an ogre, after all."

"Hadn't noticed," I deadpan.

We fall back into our usual ease with each other as we make our way to a slightly less stately part of the grove, where Fitspur and I have been given quarters. To *share*.

“Aren’t you a prince?” I ask, offended when I see our room. It’s certainly no hellhole, but it isn’t exactly spacious, nor is it anywhere near as luxuriously outfitted as Isfin’s room. She had golden goblets to drink from, stained-glass windows, and an enormous four poster bed. I notice our two twin beds and point at them like they’d just committed a crime. “Will you even fit on one of those?”

“Of course not,” he says. “I’m going to push the two beds together and sleep on both. You will sleep on the floor. After all, I am a prince.”

“A hilarious one,” I say. “You know, I believe Tantagel is a giant ass.”

“That he is,” Fitspur agrees. “But we’ve already surpassed him, brother. He will never grow higher in her majesty’s estimation than we. And...,” he lies down on one of the beds without pushing them together as threatened, “at least this is slightly more comfortable than the iron maiden.”

Fitspur stretches out his impressive mass across the bed that looks as if it was woven from polished vines, and topped with a snowy-white mattress. It is a lovely, romantic bed—as all things in the Sylvan Grove are both lovely and romantic—but it is too small for him. He tucks his hands behind his head and smiles at the ceiling.

I sit down on my bed, marveling at Fitspur’s good humor at such an obvious insult to his station. I bounce on my mattress, feeling a lack of springiness.

“Is it really better than the iron maiden?” I ask dubiously.

“Only slightly.”

I stretch out as Fitspur has done, and a thought occurs to me. “Speaking of our former quarters, I’ve been meaning to ask how it came to be that both you and Isfin were captured at the same time? And why did Asphodel keep you prisoner, rather than kill you outright?”

Fitspur frowns suddenly. “I think Asphodel only took me to get her. He must have found out how Isfin and I—” he breaks off and starts over. “Asphodel has been trying to capture her majesty for centuries, and she has had to conceal her connection to those she cares about, lest they be put in danger. I don’t know how Asphodel learned of our special relationship, but when he did, he took me to draw Isfin out of hiding.”

Their special what now?

I’m glad that I’m lying down and that I have an excuse to stare at the ceiling rather than look at him as I ask, “This special relationship—”

“I know I shouldn’t speak of it,” he says, sighing with ardor. “She is the Elf Queen, and I am an ogre. But now that I am to be made her champion, it shows how she favors me, does it not?”

Fitspur lifts his head to ask me this, and I am compelled to meet his gaze. His big, handsome, honest, blue-eyed gaze. And I know in an instant what I’ve managed to overlook since Isfin was first hauled across the dungeon floor in front of us. Fitspur loves her. He probably has loved her his whole life. Now she’s honored him above all others, even though her father picked me to be her champion. Isfin has chosen him. Son of a bitch. He’s perfect, though. I’d choose him over me.

I smile limply back at him. Though it feels like extinguishing a flame with my bare skin, I know this wound will blister, bleed, then heal like all the rest of them. Someday. He deserves her a thousand times more than I do, anyway. I might have had a chance with her under the Hanging Tree, but I pushed her away.

“I’d say she favors you greatly, brother,” I reply. “She chose you, and with good reason.”

“I know the Dagda meant for you to be her champion—” he begins with a pained look.

“Not a word of it, Fitspur,” I interrupt before he can apologize. “You were the one meant to wield Calx. You are pure of heart, my friend.”

“And you aren’t?” he asks, smirking.

“Absolutely not,” I reply with pride. “And I hear purity is a perquisite.”

“To wield Calx. Not necessarily to be Isfin’s champion,” he rebuts.

I wave a hand in the air as if the distinction is inconsequential, which it is, considering our quest. “You were meant to be her champion, Fitspur. Anyway, I’m quite happy to be Merlin. I think.” I pause, considering. “What does that mean, anyway?”

“It means you are her majesty’s advisor, and you protect her from all the magic bits, while I handle all the fighting for her honor and such—if Asphodel calls her out for single combat, that is.”

“Ah,” I say, seeing a flaw in this arrangement. “Well, you know, Asphodel won’t hesitate to use magic on you if he’s fighting you. He’s something of a bastard that way.”

Fitspur gives me a lopsided smile. “Yes, well, the Ouroboros is supposed to protect the bearer from such spells. Which is why the bearer is

usually the queen's champion."

"I see," I say, though I don't, really. I'm still not sure exactly what the Ouroboros is capable of, but at least now I know that they are a source of protection.

"Though they are on my body, and not yours, does not mean they cannot serve their purpose. If ever you should face Asphodel, I shall use them to protect you," I promise, though I have no idea how to do that.

He dips his head slightly in gratitude. "I would appreciate it," he replies quietly.

Our touching affirmation of manly devotion to each other is only disturbed by the thought of something about my tattoos that still doesn't sit right with me.

"Lady Pendaris mentioned that Asphodel was the last to wear the Ouroboros before me, but I've seen his wrists, and they definitely don't have these."

I point to the thick gauntlet of swirling blue-black lines that haven't quite healed yet. I avoid looking at them because of their disturbing habit of writhing whenever I regard them too closely. I keep thinking there are living snakes under my skin.

Fitspur shrugs. "I don't know. You should ask her tonight at the feast."

"Ah, yes. The feast," I say.

Fitspur looks as reluctant as I feel to attend this feast, which is being hosted by a bitter racist who has been replaced by the races he despises, but who still has all the money, land, and power that he believes gives him the right to be the supreme being he has decided he is. It's going to be a dumpster fire.

"Want to get drunk?" Fitspur asks.

"Immediately," I reply, groaning with relief as I rise.

Getting drunk with an ogre is like trying to out swim a fish. After the first three shots—mine normal sized, and Fitspur's pint-sized—I realize that if I try to keep up with him, I'm going to die. I don't mean that figuratively, either.

We start in our room with something clear, ephemeral, and faintly flowery. It reminds me of good daiginjo sake, though Fitspur assures me it is made of oak sap and moonlight. Then we go to a sacred apple grove that has been replanted from shoots brought from Avalon. There, Fitspur introduces me to the elf equivalent of a monk. He tends the trees and makes all kinds of apple-related products—most of those products are alcoholic, psychedelic, or aphrodisiac. The elf-monk is silent and smiling (because he's probably trashed, tripping balls, and super horny) as he pours us shots of the best applejack liquor I've ever had, and then serves us mugs of the most amazing cider.

"Does he ever talk?" I ask Fitspur after my third failed attempt to draw our patron into conversation.

"Course. But only to the trees. They'd get jealous if he talked to us," is Fitspur's reply.

"Course they would." I say, just rolling with it.

"There's supposed to be a wishing well somewhere in the Grove," Fitspur tells me. "It's supposed to grant any wish, no matter how improbable.

"Where is it?" I ask.

"Dunno. I never found it. It wandered off centuries ago."

Meomi finds us in the grove of sacred apple trees to tell us that the feast is starting soon. We ask her to sit and have a drink with us before we all head over to the farce of a feast.

"There's still plenty of time," Fitspur says as he passes Meomi a shot of the fiery-sweet applejack.

She looks askance at the liquor, and then finally takes it with a sigh. "Anything to help me deal with my mother," she says, sitting down on the soft grass beneath the apple trees with us to watch the sun set.

"I've always been deeply fond of your mother," Fitspur says.

"Because you aren't a disappointment," Meomi rejoins, looking over at him with a wistful smile. "You're perfect."

"Isn't he?" I interject as if annoyed.

Meomi grins at me. She gets it. "I can't even be mad at him because he's so wonderful," she says.

"Hardly," Fitspur replies, jostling her with his elbow in a familiar fashion.

“No, really, ever since we were children, my mother has favored you—and you aren’t even hers. It’s because you’re *perfect*,” Meomi continues, sounding only vaguely chuffed. There’s no real bitterness in her complaint against Fitzpur.

“You two grew up together here?” I ask, barely keeping up. This cider is strong.

“We did,” Meomi says, still smiling warmly at Fitzpur.

“Hang on. Aren’t you, like, centuries old?” I ask her.

“No,” Fitzpur says, shaking his head. “Meomi is younger than I am. She has only two decades and four years, isn’t that right?”

“You always remember my birthday,” Meomi notices, smiling at her drink.

“A young elf,” I say musingly.

“My mother thinks I’m a child,” Meomi says, her mood suddenly darkening.

“She’s just worried about your choice to join the Elytra, Mimi,” Fitzpur explains.

I almost do a spit take. Who would give Meomi, a monument of a woman, a little girl nickname like *Mimi*? I suppose only from Fitzpur could that nickname be an endearment, without being the least bit belittling.

“I joined the Elytra to serve my queen—as *she* should have done!” Meomi rejoins hotly.

“Your mother sees it a different way.” Fitzpur’s voice is gentle as he reasons with her. “How best to serve her majesty? Is it by defending her body—as you have honorably done—or is it to hold the Marsh elves loyal to Isfin so that they come to her aid when called upon?”

A look of pained understanding falls across Meomi’s face. “As my mother did yesterday,” she relents. Then she laughs, giving up all contention. “You always see the sense in things, don’t you Fitz?”

“I try to.” They smile at each other for a while before he taps his shoulder against hers like a big brother. “You know, she is enormously proud of you for becoming captain. As am I.”

“You have more right to pride than she,” Meomi says. “You taught me how to fight.”

“You have more right to pride in yourself than any other. For you are self-made, Meomi.”

Her smile turns into a blush.

Hang on. I do believe that Meomi has Feelings, with a capital F, for Fitspur.

“We should go, friends,” Fitspur says, oblivious to Meomi’s look of longing, as he hauls himself to standing in the magic hour light. He stretches his titanic body, muscles budging against his straining clothes like some green, oversized beefcake model, and then glances back at Meomi with a teasing grin. “We don’t want to get little Mimi in trouble with her majesty.”

As Fitspur strides toward the grove, only staggering slightly with drink, Meomi and I stand.

“Can I call you Mimi?” I tease as we follow Fitspur at a slower pace.

“Not if you like chewing your food with your own teeth,” she replies, smirking at me with side-eyes. I laugh, holding up my hands in surrender.

“He doesn’t know how you feel, does he?” I hazard.

She looks at me, struck silent. Then she stops and pokes my chest insistently with a finger. “And no one can know of it, especially not her majesty.”

“Why not?” I ask. “I think you two would make a great...”

“Fitspur has always loved Isfin, and he hopes to marry her,” she interrupts as if she can’t even bear to hear any mention of she and Fitspur as a couple. “If they knew how I felt about him, how long do you think they would be comfortable with me as the Captain of the Elytra?”

“How long would *you* be comfortable as the Captain of the Elytra were they to be married?” I ask in return.

“That doesn’t matter,” she replies stubbornly. “Neither of them can know.”

I sigh with frustration. “Fine. I will keep your secret, though I think any man, ogre, elf, or fairy would be lucky to have your love.”

She stops and stands before me with her armored shoulders wilting, and her sculpted face downturned. “I owe you, mage,” she says.

“Nonsense,” I say, taking her arm in mine and starting us down the path again. “Just don’t let me make an ass of myself at the feast. Now that I’m walking, I realize I am fully drunk.”

There are a few hours missing, or at least partially smeared together. Luckily, I’m not the only one who arrives drunk. It seems that elvan feasts

are supposed to be somewhat raucous. You wouldn't think it by looking at them, but these elves really throw down when they party. I've already told you about the shit they do to apples, but those glowing mushroom? They aren't just whimsical light sources. Fitspur and I do not partake, though a couple of saucy pink-haired Garden elves wave beckoning hands at us.

Somehow Fitspur and I make it to the High Table and sit on either side of her majesty, while Meomi takes up her station behind her chair. Isfin grins at us mischievously, and leans back so that the three of us can share the enormous golden plate that is heaped with enticing food in front of her.

"Well, at least you're wearing pants," Isfin giggles. Understandably, I'm the only one who laughs with her.

"For now," I threaten.

She hands me her fork, already loaded with a bite. "Eat something or you'll be sick later," she says, including Fitspur in her command.

He takes the knife from the other side of her plate and stabs a hunk of juicy meat for himself. Isfin sips at the honey-colored wine in her glass goblet to hide her feline smile, while Fitspur and I make short work of her dinner.

I've sobered up enough to be embarrassed by my horrendous table manners, although everyone here is too hammered to notice. Even Lord Tantagel is so faded that when he stands and calls for attention, he nearly falls over.

"Honored guests," he slurs, adding a few too many s's onto the end of *guests*. "We are gathered here to recognize the—"

Here, Tantagel's speech stops because he's been tackled from behind. I can't see what happens next because several people jump on top of me.

Once I get an armored elbow out of my eye, I realize that I am on the bottom of a pile of Elytra. To my relief I see that Isfin is down here with me, which makes sense because she is the main target of the Elytra's smothering protection and I am merely collateral salvage.

"Ramsay!" Isfin gasps.

I scabble across the few inches separating me from her.

"Are you injured?" I demand as I run my hands over her heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys, feeling for either an arrow or the sticky wetness of blood.

She shakes her head, though she allows my assessment of her, and her frantic eyes meet mine. “Where’s Fitspur?” she begs.

My gratitude at finding her undamaged is curtailed by her obvious favoritism for another man. Ogre. Whatever. Doesn’t matter because she’s right to be worried for him. I can hear Fitspur’s grunts and growls outside the encasing Elytra.

“He defends your majesty,” I tell her as I pull her up to standing. We need to move.

“Who attacks us?” she asks, still dazed by this sudden violence.

The Elytra have woven what appears to be a chrysalis about their bodies, creating a dome of protection around Isfin and I. Meomi’s face appears upon her own back, like an image projected on a screen.

“The Unseely,” Meomi replies.

“The Unseely? Here, in the Grove?” Isfin repeats disbelievingly. “Which ones?” she asks, shaking her head as if to clear it.

“Trolls, Changelings, Hobgoblins, and...Ogres.”

Isfin’s face falls. “Show me,” she whispers, lifting her eyes to the roof of the chrysalis dome above us.

We both see the images of the fight happening outside the circle of Elytra projected like a movie on the polymer-like prism of the Elytra’s chrysalis. I see Fitspur square off against an Obsidian Troll twice his size and jump for an exit that isn’t there.

“Where’s the door?” I yell.

“No, Ramsay!” Isfin shouts, holding my arm. “You’ll be killed!”

“Fitspur is out there—alone! He’ll be cut to pieces!” I look to Meomi’s projected face. Her duty demands that she keep Isfin safe by creating a barrier and keeping me and my magic close at hand, but her heart wants me to go help Fitspur. I offer her a solution “Get her majesty to the Dagda’s barrow. I’ll meet you there when I have Fitspur.”

Meomi addresses Isfin. “He is your Merlin,” she says by way of apology. “It’s my duty to follow his commands over yours if your safety comes into question.”

“That’s interesting,” I say, looking down at Isfin. She glares back up at me. “Let me out, Captain,” I order. And Meomi does.

“Ramsay!” Isfin cries, but I’m already through the hole in the chrysalis. It closes behind me and the Elytra move Isfin away from the skirmish

blindingly fast.

There's no time to feel relieved by her safe departure, though. A snarling wolf-like creature tackles me, and I am forced to use nearly a year of my own life force to fry the beast with a *Lightning* spell. And just in time, too. The rabid creature grazes my throat with its teeth, but convulses and falls away from me, stone dead, before it can sink them in any farther than skin deep.

The smell of burnt monster fur is just horrendous, and my tattoos are suddenly stinging like someone's poured vinegar on them. With watering eyes, I feel around on the ground for a fallen weapon of some kind. I nearly slice my pinkie finger off, but I find an ax. It's one of those axes that has a spear tip on the top of the shaft, and a circle of spikes beneath the double gleaming blades. Bit much if you ask me. Why so many pointy bits?

I rise, hefting it. Well, nearly hefting it. Okay, I can barely lift it with both hands choked up practically to the base of the double-sided blade, but there's no time to trade up. Something else is coming toward me, hissing and spitting. It's small and green and sort of gnome-like, but with an unsettling lizard quality to it. Probably some kind of hobgoblin. I brace myself and ready my weapon.

Well, I try to ready it. This ax is the *worst*. I can't find the center of balance on the haft, so I basically just drop it on the rabid little creep. It squeaks a bit and then dies. I thought I'd be totally wracked with guilt the first time I killed a sentient being, but it turns out...eh. Not really. That punk had it coming. I haul the ax back up out of the mess I made of the hobgoblin and look around for Fitspur.

Shit. He's on the ground, being pummeled by an Obsidian troll.

I charge forward howling, ax first, and hope the momentum created by my unhinged attack will at least distract the Obsidian troll long enough for Fitspur to do something about it.

This ax weighs, no joke, at least fifty pounds. I have zero control over what I'm doing, so I should count myself lucky that I hit my target at all. The fact that I end up shoving my ax between his butt cheeks—while, admittedly, not the most heroic of moves—is both entirely accidental and extremely effective.

I can't help but groan in pain along with the troll when I realize I have "hit home" as it were. Okay, *this* makes me feel guilty. Even Fitspur, laid

out as he is on the ground, grimaces when he catches on to exactly how his opponent has been impaled.

“That’s terrible!” Fitspur yells at me.

“I know! I didn’t mean to do it like that!” I start blathering. “S-should I pull it out, or...?”

“No!” Fitspur replies, gagging. “That’s *so* much worse!”

He moves from underneath the troll carefully, so he isn’t cut by its razor-sharp edges of obsidian glass, and comes to its side to stand next to me. We both cringe repeatedly as we watch the troll spasms a few times before it finally keels over and dies.

I gesture to the other dead Obsidian trolls scattered nearby. “You got most of them,” I say, hoping to change the subject away from my ignoble kill.

But Fitspur isn’t listening. Something has caught his eye. He goes around to the back side of the unfortunately impaled troll.

“Don’t do that,” I warn. “There’s nothing to see back there.”

“That handle,” he says, as if dazed. He closes his eyes and pulls the ax out.

“You really could have found another weapon,” I say, pacing in a circle so I don’t barf.

Fitspur holds the ax up and inspects it. His face falls, all squeamishness lost. “This is my father’s ax,” he says quietly.

He picks his head up and looks around, alert now to something I don’t quite understand yet. I scan for Asphodel, but I don’t think that’s what Fitspur is searching for. He looks over the faces of the Unseely fighters who are still left in the fray with the elves, while he comes over toward me. He easily moves the ax from one massive hand to the other as if it weighed no more than a dagger, and holds it up so I may take a better look at it. Which, considering where it’s been, I don’t want to do. I take a step back.

“Where did you get this ax?” he asks me, eyes wild. He looks crazed.

“I found it on the ground,” I tell him gently.

“Where?”

I point lamely in the general direction.

“Wait!” I yell after him as he chases down the path I’ve indicated, his eyes on the ground.

Though the skirmish is basically over, there are still fighters about, and he is completely distracted. I take up an elvan spear that I find next to its fallen owner and guard Fitzspur while he inspects the dead Unseely around us.

Now, *this* is a weapon. Balanced, solid, and it feels so right in the hand. I could get used to this spear.

“No, no, no,” I hear Fitzspur whisper frantically behind me. I turn to see him drop his weapon and fall the ground on his knees.

I run to him and take a knee beside him while he palms what I momentarily mistake for a mossy rock. Fitzspur gently turns the round object over in his hands. On the other side is a face. It’s an ogre’s severed head.

He makes a broken sound and his mountainous shoulders crumble. I drop my spear and catch him before he falls completely into sorrow.

“It’s Rickspur.” He swallows hard. “My eldest brother.”

Fitzspur cradles the head to his chest, lost in loss, while my anxious eyes dance around, looking. This is just the sort of thing Asphodel would do to weaken his foe.

While Asphodel’s apprentice, I learned that there are no coincidences where he is concerned. He understands how people work and he understands that the best way to defeat someone like Fitzspur is to break his spirit. This would be the moment that Asphodel would come wafting out of the shadows like some angel of darkness to offer Fitzspur the return of his brother, or his whole tribe for that matter, if only to take the greater prize of his soul.

“We must go,” I tell Fitzspur, taking up my spear in my free hand while I haul him up with the other. I have to get him out of here.

“Rickspur is the Ogre Whump, now that our father is dead. He must have led this attack,” Fitzspur says, still clutching the head.

I lever the ax handle in his direction until he takes it. “Let’s go,” I say.

“Why? Why would he attack the elves?” Fitzspur demands.

“I don’t know,” I reply. “Though I do not doubt that Asphodel is behind it somehow. We must go, Fitzspur.”

“Where?” he asks, at his wits’ end. “My own tribe is against us. Where can we go?”

“To her majesty,” I say stiffly, reminding him of his duty. “She awaits her champion beneath the Hanging Tree. Now get up.”

He nods, his eyes growing calm, and places his brother's head back down on the ground gently. Then he spools his awesome bulk up to standing where he hefts his father's ax.

"Yes. To her majesty," he agrees. His eyes meet mine gratefully. "Thank you, Ramsay."

We run through the glade, already ablaze, hearing shouts and screams from the arboreal city that is falling down around us in smoking ruin. We can't stop to help. Every second I'm away from Isfin ticks louder in my head like a doomsdays clock. I can feel my feet striking the earth faster and faster, every footfall pounding my hatred for Asphodel deeper into me. I stood by for a year and watched him grow stronger, too scared to even try to find out what he was planning, or what he wanted. I thought if I read enough scrolls, I would find some spell that would miraculously tell me how to kill him. I was waiting for something to save me, and this is the result.

We leave the ruined Eden behind us and start vaulting over the boulders scattered beneath the oaks, both of us fueled by dread and rage.

Fitspur suddenly falls behind. "Wait!" he calls out in a raspy, hushed voice.

I slow and glance back at him. He is looking about frantically, his face frozen with confusion.

"I have no memory of this place," he says, keeping his voice lowered.

I look around, my chest heaving, but I couldn't tell one gnarly oak tree from another. I look left, I look right. I look left again—hang on. Left looks distinctly different from just a moment ago. I squint my eyes trying to peer through the darkness and the mist that glows pearl-blue in the moonlight. One of the trees *settles* as if it had just arrived at a new spot.

"I think the trees are moving," I whisper to Fitspur. He nods, his eyes two wide marbles in his head. "That's very disturbing," I add.

"It's a defense to protect the Dagda," he says, doing an admirable job of sounding calm. "No one can find the Dagda unless he wants to be found."

"Then it's a perfect hiding place for Isfin," I say, nodding, because it is. "But a very inconvenient rendezvous point," I add, unable to resist tacking on what I believe to be a just complaint. "Meomi might have been more forthcoming about that when I suggested it."

“She is not very forthcoming about most things,” he says by way of consoling me.

“Who’s not very forthcoming?” the Dagda asks. His head is suddenly between ours, huddled close like a co-conspirator. Fitspur and I nearly jump out of our skin. As we both try to stammer out an answer, he loses interest and turns away. “Follow me,” he says, the lucidum in his crazy animal eyes flashing in the moonlight.

We don’t take more than a dozen paces before the barrow appears out of the mist, which is both meteorologically and topographically impossible. But this whole grove is magic, or at least magic-adjacent, so Fitspur and I don’t blink an eye as we follow the Dagda into the black hole at the base of the barrow. The passageway is a tight squeeze for me, but for Fitspur it’s like trying to pick a lock with his entire body. He gets stuck more than once, and I’m obliged to ram my shoulder into him until he’s popped past the impediment like a dry cork out of a bottle. The Dagda keeps us moving at a quick pace, leaving no time for either of us to become claustrophobic.

The tunnel opens into the Dagda’s clay-floored cavern. The cauldron is bubbling away in the middle of the circular space, over a smokeless fire that smells strongly of cedar just as I remember from my last visit, but this time, the walls seems to be farther apart and the ceiling much higher overhead.

I look more closely, and I see that there also seem to be chambers leading off from this one room, and the floors on these hallways are paved with smooth rock. I tilt my head so I may peer down one of the many branching hallways. Lights flicker the length of them, and their wood-paneled walls are clothed in tapestries. This isn’t the rude and rough-hewn cave carved out of the damp earth that I had experienced before, but the entrance to what appears to be an underground castle.

“What...?” I begin, but before I can ask the Dagda when he decided to bring a decorator in to cozy up his hovel, I lock eyes with Isfin who is standing on the other side of the fire, flanked by her Elytra.

I move toward her, relief cracking like an egg inside me. When we’re parted I’m so busy ignoring how anxious I am that I don’t notice how intolerable it is to be separated from her until I see her again.

“Your majesty,” Fitspur says, making it to Isfin’s side before I do. “How it gladdens my heart to see you safe.”

“As is mine to see you,” she replies warmly, squeezing his big hands in hers. “Ramsay would not leave you behind,” she adds, turning her eyes to me.

“You made it,” I say. I’m close enough to take her hand as well, but I don’t, because I blew it, and I’m not pure of heart enough to be her champion.

“It was good thinking to send us here,” she replies, looking up at me

“I figured no one would be insane enough to attack the Dagda,” I reply with a shrug.

“Who’s insane?” the Dagda asks, his face inserted between Fitspur’s and mine again. Fitspur and I both startle, but Isfin appears to be used to this behavior from her father and she merely sighs at him like he just told a dad joke.

“Never mind,” the Dagda says, waving an impatient hand through the air. “What is that?” he points to the elvan spear I’m carrying.

“A spear? I p-picked it up during the battle,” I stammer, afraid now that I’ve violated some important elvan tradition. It is a beautiful weapon, and I noticed in my short stay here that the elves are particular about their spears.

The Dagda grabs it out of my hand and sniffs the elegantly carved haft. Then he pings one of his grimy nails off the gleaming metal tip that is embossed with elvish runes. He makes a sour face as he listens to it ring, although all I hear is a sound as high and true as a bell.

“What rubbish,” he says, throwing it over his shoulder.

“It’s good enough for now,” I argue weakly, but he’s already turned away from me and gone to a far wall.

“If you’re going to escort my daughter back to Avalon in order to retrieve Calx, you will need a proper weapon,” he says, rifling through an old chest.

“He knows of our plans, then?” Fitspur asks Meomi. “Did you tell him?”

“I don’t think he needs to be told much of anything,” she confides, shaking her head in answer.

“Calx is the key to Avalon,” the Dagda continues as he roots around a seemingly bottomless chest. “Asphodel can’t wield Calx, for he is not pure of heart, but he can use Calx to stab at the heart of Avalon. Weakens it, you see. Bleeding it out until, one day, it will die. They’re tied together, now.

Calx and Avalon. Whoever frees Calx frees Avalon, and whoever is the owner of Calx, will be tied to the isle, life for life. As I once was, before Asphodel came along with his ruddy sword and his ruddy magic and went and stabbed my isle...Aha!" He suddenly shouted triumphantly. "There it is!"

The Dagda comes back with a gnarly staff that has a bit of rusting metal in the tip, and hands it to me proudly. I take the decrepit bit of firewood because the Dagda is looking at me like he's giving me the keys to his vintage Porsche. My tattoos crawl under my skin unpleasantly at the touch of it and I look away. Seeing them writhe like big worms under my skin is disturbing.

"You have my gratitude," I say shaking cobwebs off it and hoping I don't get bit by whatever arachnid I just evicted.

"You're going to need that," he tells me while giving me a piercing stare. Then he turns abruptly to Fitspur. He looks him up and down appraisingly and notes the ax. "I see you've already got a proper weapon. You'll make a good Whump. Come along, children."

We trail after the Dagda, who is moving quickly toward one of the many passageways. Fitspur doesn't immediately follow us.

"Wait," he calls out after the Dagda. "I can't be the Whump. I have *five* elder siblings."

The Dagda stops and turns, his eyes flashing like quicksilver. "You are all that is left of your line, Fitspur. Fortunately, you are enough," he says with a soft smile before turning and leading us down a passageway.

I place my hand on Fitspur's shoulder and squeeze until he meets my eyes. He places his hand over mine and nods. I don't have to say anything.

"Thank you, brother," he whispers, and then grimaces at his choice of words. "I suppose you are all the family I have left."

"Not all," Isfin says, touching his arm. She glances back at Meomi. "Isn't that right?"

"Certainly not if my mother has anything to say about it. She'll probably try to adopt you," Meomi says, trying to sound lighthearted, though I can hear the strain in her voice.

"Are you coming?" the Dagda calls impatiently from way down one of the passageways, completely unaware that Fitspur is grieving.

Isfin rolls her eyes. “Yes!” she shouts back, very much like an annoyed teenager. “Forgive him, Fitspur. My father lives outside of time, and as such his timing is usually atrocious.”

We all follow the Dagda, but Fitspur and I glance back at the passageway that leads to the exit.

“Isn’t that the way out?” I ask him.

“I thought so,” Fitspur replies uncertainly.

“Can’t go that way,” the Dagda says, suddenly standing between Fitspur and I. We both jump yet again, and this time I’ve had it with this parlor trick.

“Stop doing that!” I shout, too annoyed to be awed by him anymore. “And why are you leading us deeper into the barrow? We’ve got to get to Avalon.”

The Dagda chuckles. “Under and through, young mage. Under and through. You’ll never make it to Avalon aboveground with Asphodel chasing you, not even with that fancy staff I’ve given you.”

I refrain from pointing out that the staff is, in fact, a piece of junk while he makes his way back to the front of our group.

“This passageway will take us to Avalon?” I call after him.

“It will take you to the shores of the lake surrounding Avalon,” he yells back over his shoulder. “From there you must fight your way across.”

Fitspur and I share a dubious look.

“Of course,” Fitspur says under his breath.

“Yes,” I add facetiously. “It would be too sensible if he had a tunnel that went directly to Calx.”

The Dagda’s cackling laughter at the front of our party lets us know that he heard us.

So, the thing about hanging out with individuals who transcend time is that they have no respect for space, either.

We pass by branching tunnels, each of which seems to come from a different era or place or both. Linoleum floors and Formica tabletops gleam down one hallway, while another is lined with rusting medieval armor. Lascaux-like cave paintings decorate one cavernous hallway, while another is as pristine and white-plastered as a Soho art gallery.

Here in the Dagda's tunnels time and space chew at each other—two ends of the same thing that is consuming itself. Very much like the snakes on my forearms, come to think of it. I take a single step and feel like it takes forever, and then blink and find myself much farther than I should be. I also seem to be moving through more space than I should be, and I don't like the sensation. It's like I'm being pushed.

We're always pushed through time, I suppose. Even when we are sitting still our bodies are traveling forward through time whether we like it or not. But, unless you are on some serious psychedelics, time has a metronomic predictability upon which the entire understanding of human existence is based. Very much like space. You take a step, and you move forward that exact amount. But down here in the Dagda's tunnels the metronome for time and space has lost its rhythm, and sometimes I get the feeling that it might be ticking backwards. I don't actually see any broken teacups jumping off the floor and back onto their saucers as they reform themselves,

but I suspect that's what's happening all around me in every molecule of air and every smudge of dirt beneath my feet.

In short, I've decided that I really hate time travel in any iteration, including this one. Which I'm assuming to be some sort of space-time travel that is intended to get us to Avalon through this *Alice in Wonderland* rabbit hole, which would probably be impossible if it were a real tunnel that lay beneath the Dagda's barrow.

Confused? Me too. I'm also nauseous. It's not as bad as being timetorn, but it's in that ballpark.

Fitspur upchucks first. Right in front of a hallway that looks like a London Underground tunnel. All the elves seem perfectly fine, but Fitspur and I are not faring as well. Elves are probably immune to the effects of time-space travel, but humans and ogres are certainly not. Fitspur and I trade bouts of sickness the entire journey, though I am proud to say that I don't throw up quite as much as he did, but I don't think anyone *could* throw up quite as much as an ogre. Frigging endless amount of barf in an ogre, in case you were wondering.

Fitspur and I stagger out from the mouth of that miserable hole in the ground and throw ourselves down on the cool, dew-speckled grass surrounding it.

"Let's not do that again," he moans.

"Let's not," I agree, watching the stars spin in the dark sky above me.

"Next time we should take the phoenix," he suggests.

"Lady Yxisis," I mumble, but I'm mostly unconscious.

I am on the blank page again, but I don't feel like the author is screwing with me this time.

I can see that smudge at the edge, and I go toward it. The closer I get, the clearer and more three dimensional it becomes. Yep. It's Asphodel, but I'm not scared or angry or any of the things that I could be, probably should be, as I approach. Right now, he just looks like a guy sitting there. He's not menacing. He's wearing all black and looking annoyingly perfect as he always does, but minus the hint of underlying evil.

He looks up at me as I stop and stand over him, and he smiles sheepishly, as if he knows he's done something wrong—not soul-bendingly wrong, either. Just a little wrong, on par with, say, hitting on an ex-girlfriend of mine and not like trying to murder me and everyone I care about. He stands and faces me.

“Hello Ramsay,” he says in his musical voice. “Will you walk with me?”

“Do I have a choice?” I reply.

“Of course you do.” He sweeps his arm out. “That’s what all of this is about, isn’t it? Your choice.”

“What do you mean?” I ask warily—because I am *not* going to screw up and tell Asphodel Lucitopia is a story, so I can get stuck here.

But Asphodel isn’t trying to get me to say anything. He shakes his head and looks away, like I’ve missed his point.

“I mean that you have a choice, and I don’t. You get to decide who you are, whereas all my decision are made for me.” He laughs ruefully. “Half of them don’t even make any sense.”

Huh. Look, I’m not dumb enough to fall for the whole sympathy for the devil thing, but I do side with Asphodel on this one particular point. I’ve always felt like his character lost his temper way too easily and made the most drastic choices when he didn’t necessarily have to. Like the author opted for a sledgehammer when all she needed was a screwdriver. Apparently, Asphodel’s character is smart enough to call bullshit on how he was written, and if he can do that then maybe he isn’t all bad? I don’t know.

“Okay, sure. I’ll walk with you,” I reply, still keeping my distance and still not admitting anything. I’m just walking with him because, to be honest, he’s fascinating.

He leads me to the edge of the page. We look out over the edge and see nothing.

“We’re in your dream, Ramsay, but this is what I see when I dream. Nothing.” He looks at me with a raised brow. “I know why this is. Someone told me once what I really am—and I suspect you know too. What I want to know is *why*. Why am I the bad guy?”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

His face hardens and I can sense the menacing aspect of his character rising in him again. I guess he can't help it. He's just written that way.

"Isfin does."

"You're wrong," I reply. "She doesn't know any more than you do—in fact, she knows less."

"She doesn't have to die for me to find out," he bargains. "She just needs to bleed a little."

"You know I can't allow that."

He looks at me and smiles. "Oh, I see. You've fallen in love with her. Well, no matter. I don't need you to get to her."

"What does that mean?" I try to take a step toward him, but I feel myself being pulled back.

"I will be seeing you and your queen shortly," he says.

"Asphodel! Don't do it!" I yell, but he's getting farther and farther away from me, and I can't reach him anymore.

I'm vaguely aware of the fact that there's an important conversation going on over my half-asleep body, but there's also an important conversation going on in my dream. I need to convince Asphodel that he does have a choice. He doesn't have to keep playing the villain. But then I hear the Dagda say my name, and that wakes me up completely.

"You had him *change* something in the past?" the Dagda asks, shocked.

"No, father," Isfin replies, trying to sound droll, though I know her well enough now to notice that her voice sounds a bit shaky. Maybe even scared. "I had Ramsay go back and do the opposite of one single choice—*before* the observer returned. It was a closed-box situation. I risked nothing." Here, Isfin breaks off and snorts. "Except Ramsay's life, of course. But he survived it, and without the Ouroboros, I might add."

"Huh," the Dagda breathes. "Asphodel was the observer, I'm assuming?" There is a pause, where I guess Isfin must be nodding. "This was before Asphodel drained your blood to see his past?"

"Yes. Though Ramsay saw part of that too," she says cringingly. "I don't know how much, but I know that Ramsay saw Asphodel as the hero

he was originally meant to be.”

“That explains their connection. Ramsay fights it, though.” The Dagda makes a frustrated sound. “Daughter, you have made a monumental mess of this.”

“I know,” Isfin groans in response. “Help me, father.”

“I can’t,” the Dagda replies, laughing in a congenial way. “I have no idea what to do—that’s why I had *you*. I needed someone smarter than me to run things.”

“I can’t do it,” she says in a small voice.

“Why not?” the Dagda replies.

“Because I can’t be objective.” There is a slight pause where I hear her huffing in frustration and pacing around. “About *either* of them.”

“Well, they are both sworn to you now, so I suppose the fact that someone must die will at least leave you with the other.”

Hang on. One of us must *die*?

“That’s not why I did it,” Isfin says defensively. “Just because Asphodel was both Merlin and Champion does not mean that anyone else could ever be both again. It was unfair to Ramsay.”

“I agree, daughter,” the Dagda replies gently. “But having two of them does give you options when the situation arrives. And it will arrive, no matter how you try to stack the deck.”

“I know, father. I too have seen death in the closing of this circle,” Isfin says in a hushed tone.

I hear the Dagda sigh. “It’s the same pattern, woven from new wool. We have a few years after a Blank Zone ends, and then Asphodel returns with no memory, a new plan, and there’s another battle to the death. There was nothing you could have done to protect either of them. If it’s any consolation, it’s always ended well before,” he adds cheerfully.

“How?” Isfin asks, as if she is at the end of her rope. “How could this end well if it ends in one of their deaths?”

“I don’t know,” the Dagda replies, baffled. “It just...does.”

Isfin laughs under her breath and then asks, “Will you come on this quest with us, father?”

“No,” he replies, already moving away. “I must prepare. Soon, I am to sleep again.”

“How long?” Isfin calls. There is a long pause, and then I hear Isfin’s voice break with sorrow.

“It’s alright, girl,” the Dagda says in a soothing way. “It’s *your* time now. You were always a better queen than I was a king. You don’t need me anymore.”

“But I do need you. I don’t want you to go, father.”

“I know, love. I know,” he says. “And I am sorry.”

I can’t help it. I let my eyes open just a slit. I see Isfin hugging her father, her face buried in his musky chest while he smooths her hair. He palms the back of her head in his giant, hairy hands until she looks up at him.

“When the sword is taken from the stone, I will sleep. You must bring my body back to Avalon to rest,” he says. “Swear it to me, girl.”

“I swear to you, father. I will bring your body back to Avalon.” Isfin’s head falls back against that Dagda’s chest as if she doesn’t have the strength to say anything else.

“It’s alright. I’ll come back. Someday. Maybe.”

“The Once and Future King,” Isfin said quietly.

I watch, though I shouldn’t, while they part in stages. A final hug, a last smile, a few tears, and the Dagda enters the cave, rejoining the earth in a blending of shadow and fog.

When he is gone, Isfin turns her back on the cave and wraps her arms around her shoulders. She tilts her face up to the stars and smiles at them through her tears.

“I know you’re awake, Ramsay,” she says, still looking skyward. “Did you hear the bit about one of you dying?”

“Yes,” I answer, keeping my voice down as I sit up. “I also heard that bit about Asphodel and I being connected.”

She comes and sits next to me, wiping her eyes. “You shouldn’t be too concerned about either of those things. There’s no such thing as a knowable future.” She leans close so that our shoulders touch.

“I saw Asphodel in my dream tonight.”

“It’s not just a dream, Ramsay,” she warns.

“I know,” I say frowning and looking down at my hands. “He’s using a *Visitation* spell. He’s trying to win me over, I think.”

“Is he succeeding?” She watches me carefully, but not with mistrust. I meet her eyes and shake my head slowly. She smiles at me as if she knew as much. “Betrayal is part of the pattern, but I don’t fear it from you.”

“I would say that’s comforting to know, but we are still talking about the pattern that ends with either mine or Fitzpur’s death,” I say, trying to make light of it. Isfin doesn’t smile, instead, her face falls.

“It doesn’t have to end that way,” she says, getting upset. “The future is not carved in stone.”

“Look, it’s alright,” I tell her. “It’s not all that shocking to find out that one of us could possibly die on this quest. We’ve always known what we were getting into.”

“I won’t let it happen,” she promises.

“You and the Dagda mentioned the Blank Zones,” I say, trying to lead her away from the whole death thing.

Isfin nods and rubs her arms, setting them on top of her drawn up knees as if she’s cold. “The Blank Zones are times when...how do I describe it?”

She looks at me like I might know the answer. Her trusting expression disarms me. I shrug and, noticing that the damp breeze is quite biting, I tilt my shoulders to shield her from it while she continues. “If you live long enough, you can’t help but notice there are these periods of time that you can’t remember actually *living* through.”

I laugh. “Yes, there are a few lost nights in my life as well,” I say, unable to look at her for the memory of our lost night together. I shake off the confused and, frankly, exciting images of that night and say, “Sometimes it feels like years of my life have dissolved down to one or two inklings of a memory, and even those are unclear.”

She regards me keenly, her big, liquid eyes narrowed. “You are speaking of your father and mother,” she guesses.

“No. I remember them far too clearly.” I look away from her, steeling myself against both the old ache and the pity for that ache that I sense in her. “But how could you possibly know anything about my parents? We’ve never spoken of them.”

“I know all you have shown me,” she replies, shrugging.

“What have I *shown* you?”

“Whenever someone relives a memory through my blood, I see it too,” she tells me, as if that makes perfect sense. Which I guess it does.

“So you saw...” I begin, hoping she has no real answer for me. I don’t quite know how I feel about Isfin knowing too much about me.

“Your father’s sickness. Your first training as a mage—not mage. Medic? Strange pronunciation, but similar meaning to mage, I think. And I saw the potions you used to keep him alive for as long as you could. Your native land is quite barbaric to me,” she responds, wrinkling her nose in apology. “All those needles you stuck under your father’s skin...”

“They’re called injections,” I say, trying not to get defensive, but failing. “The needles had potions in them to help my father fight his sickness.”

“They looked like torture. For both of you.” Her eyes round with sadness. “And after he died, your mother...”

“We were talking about the Blank Zone,” I interrupt. Too harshly maybe, but I just can’t talk about my mother. I need to get this conversation back on Isfin. “You said that you don’t remember what happens to you over the course of a Blank Zone. Are you sure you aren’t just falling into a deep sleep like your father does?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“But over hundreds of years, maybe nothing special happened. It’s normal to not be able to remember specific days,” I argue. “I’ve forgotten more than half my life already and I’ve lived for scarcely more than two decades.”

This is actually something that I find quite disturbing. I would guess that my childhood has been pared down to a dozen or so memories, and there are maybe twenty days that I remember with perfect clarity from my ‘tweens. I’ve often wondered who I am if most of me is missing.

“I know how human memory works,” she says. “I’ve made something of a study of it to ensure that Asphodel’s complete loss of self after the first Blank Zone was not due to some human defectiveness.”

“Ah...” I say, balking at her word choice. “Human memory is not defective.”

“But it is ephemeral. Mine is not. I am a vault of time. My memory does not blur or shift as yours does.”

That’s truly terrifying. To forget nothing. On second thought, maybe it’s better if I don’t know the parts of me that are missing. Maybe humanity’s ephemeral memory is more Darwinian than defective.

“And yet, I have no memory of the Blank Zones,” she continues. “When one of them ends, hundreds of years have passed, and it’s as if someone has told me what happened to me over that time, but I don’t remember it happening. I can’t remember one single day, or what occurred in it. Just... that it was a peaceful and prosperous era.”

“That is very strange.”

“It is,” she agrees. “And I am not the only one who experiences it. All the elders know of this phenomenon.”

I stare at Isfin’s profile, which is picture perfect. But that’s not surprising because her profile is an actual picture. I remember seeing this precise view of her in a pen and ink drawing at the end of an illustrated version of the book *Dragon in The Chronicles of Lucitopia*.

Suddenly, the answer to Isfin’s predicament dawns on me. If you were a recurring character in a series of books, how would it feel to leapfrog across hundreds of years between those books with only a few quick lines of explanation to cover all that lost time? Probably like you had experienced a Blank Zone.

“Happily Ever After...” I murmur. “I think I understand.” She looks at me with a quizzical smile on her face.

“I think you do,” she replies, as if surprised to find herself saying that. “How is it that you can misinterpret every intimate encounter you and I have had, and yet you understand things that I can’t seem to explain to anyone else—not even my own father. He accepts the Blank Zones as a matter of course.”

I meet her eyes and freeze with my lips parted as if to speak. First, how does *she* think I have misinterpreted our intimate encounters? Second, I can’t tell her that I understand her because I know something she doesn’t—that she and her father and everyone she loves and hates are just characters in a book.

I want to. I want to be honest with her and tell her everything about who she is, and who I am, and what I’m doing here, but I can’t, or I’ll be stuck here forever. I also want to ask her about that night in the Dagda’s cave, but I can’t because I don’t want to offend her again.

“I am your Merlin,” I say before flies take residence in my gaping mouth. “I can’t advise you if I can’t manage to understand you first.”

She gives me a sly smile, knowing that my answer was at least partial, if not full bullshit. “Right,” she says. “So, Merlin. Advise me. How are we going to get across the lake?”

My eyes follow her sweeping gesture to peruse said lake.

The day has dawned. Pink and golden light suffuses the air, gilding everything with baby-soft tenderness. The rich grass beneath my fingers, flecked with flowers that look like little white stars, rolls as thick as fur until it reaches the fog tendrils that seep between the cattails growing on the edge of the still waters of a mirror lake. Pewter skies cool the hot eye of the sun, and mist undulates like a lover over the surface of the water.

“Wow,” I say, standing up and walking slowly toward the edge of the water. A breeze ruffles past my face and I smell apple blossoms in the wind. The lake calls to me. The water is so dark below the still surface.

“It would be your death, Merlin,” Meomi says in my ear.

Where did Meomi come from? I tear my eyes away from the haunting view of the lake and look her in the eye. She is restraining me, I realize, using both her arms and all her considerable strength to do so.

“You must resist, or you will be torn to pieces.” she says, her eyes gentle though her tone is commanding.

“What will tear me to pieces?” I ask.

“Asphodel’s Enthra,” she answers. “They are just below the surface of the water.”

I relax, and she relaxes, though less than I do. I search for Isfin and find her sprinting toward us. How did I get to the edge of the lake so fast?

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“You are summoned across the lake to Avalon as we elves are,” Meomi remarks, regarding me with narrowed eyes. I don’t know why she’s looking at me like that, though she does seem to be mentally measuring my ears.

“Ramsay!” Isfin exclaims when she reaches us. “I had no idea, else I would have prepared you!”

She throws her arms around me and I hold her, more focused on the fact that she’s in my arms than anything else, to be honest. I see Fitspur wake and rise, and I let her go. Not because I feel guilty or anything. Well, mostly not because of that. He’s running toward us—toward the lake?

“Oh no! Fitspur!” I say, putting Isfin behind me as I break into a sprint.

I close the distance between me and Fitzpur, vaguely aware of the fact that he doesn't seem possessed. But maybe I didn't either when I made my death run at the lake. I get mere inches from him before I register everyone else shouting, but it's too late to stop. I'm already in mid tackle. Fitzpur eyes widen with shock, and he sort of scoops me up to deflect my take-down, swings me around with my momentum, and ends up holding me in his arms like a bride.

Don't know what I was thinking. I couldn't take Fitzpur down even if I was riding a bear. The result of my tackling him was always going to be humiliating, though this vignette I managed to create is quite special, I must admit.

"Ramsay? Are you alright?" Fitzpur asks, looking at me askance.

At this point Isfin and Meomi are howling with laughter. They can barely get up off the ground and make their way toward us.

"Yes. You can put me down now," I tell him. This is embarrassing. Very, very embarrassing. Fitzpur deposits me on my feet.

"Why did you—" he begins.

"I thought you were running for the lake," I reply. I can't look at anyone quite yet, so I search for my lost dignity in my tunic. When I've found a shred of it, I tug down on my tunic and smooth it with my hands.

"Why would I—"

"Because *I* did." I look over at Isfin and Meomi who are so weak-kneed, they can barely shuffle over to join us. "It was an honest mistake!" I holler out, for both Fitzpur's and their benefit.

"Ramsay, he—" Meomi breaks off, still giggling, as she and Isfin reach us. "Fitzpur isn't called to Avalon. He's an ogre, not an elf."

"So what? I'm a human," I say with what I believe to be a deserved amount of righteous indignation.

"And it is therefore strange that you would crave Avalon as we elves do. All I can say is that I pity you for that," Isfin says, all humor bleeding out of her demeanor as she speaks.

I look away from her face, only to find that the Elytra are wearing similarly shattered expressions. I wish that I had let them all laugh at me for a bit longer. Anything, but this sadness from Isfin. It makes me feel unsafe, somehow. Like her sadness, were it to get too strong, could threaten something more important to me than anything.

I look out across the lake. I feel the pull of some hazy offshore promise of perfection, but I can control myself now that I know what it is, and luckily, I do not start running toward my doom. The lake is beautiful, and I want it, but why does Asphodel want it? If I'm going to defeat him, I need to start thinking about Asphodel and what he wants. I'm not going to wait for some spell I read in a scroll to save me anymore.

"Why does Asphodel occupy Avalon? Does it fuel his magic somehow?" I ask.

"No," Meomi replies. "It actually costs him dearly to keep it."

"Then, why does he do it?"

"Avalon is not just the source of the elves' long lives; it is the place where our hearts are at their fullest," Isfin replies, looking up at me. The gentle breeze sends a strand of her hair fluttering across her face. "Our love for our home is so strong, that we all wish to throw ourselves across the water as you tried to do. It is in this way that Asphodel both defeats us and punishes us, for though he cannot use Avalon to aid his magic, by separating us from our home he is not only slowly killing our bodies, he is also breaking our hearts."

Yep. That sounds like the asshole I know. Also, I consider myself to be an exceptionally strong person for not kissing Isfin right now.

"Tactically, where do we stand?" I ask, glancing at Fitspur.

"We can't sail across, no matter how large an army we take. They will sink us," he tells me. "This grass is green for all the bones rotting under it."

"Navigating by boat is nearly impossible, anyway," Meomi says, with a grimace as she reads my increasingly alarmed expression. "The mist swallows all but those called to Avalon. It's one of Avalon's many defenses that pre-date Asphodel."

"Right. Well, apparently, I *am* called to Avalon so that's good."

"And we can't fly there," Isfin adds. "Another one of Avalon's innate defenses is that it is undetectable from the air."

"Hidden?" I inquire. "Because there are ways around illusion. One does not have to see something in order to find it."

"No, unfortunately. It's no illusion," Isfin replies. "Avalon simply isn't there if you were to fly over it."

I bite my lower lip in thought while they stare at me, waiting for me to come up with a solution which—honestly? Bit unfair. I've had five minutes

to come up with something and they've had a thousand years.

"Let's have a look at these Enthra," I say to Fitspur. "Meomi. Stay here and protect the Queen."

"Yes, Merlin," Meomi says, drawing her sword.

"Wait, you'll need my essence to fuel your magic—" Isfin protests as the Elytra close around her like a carapace, sealing her in beneath their iridescent shell before she can finish.

"She's going to be *really* angry when she gets out," Fitspur warns while we walk back to the place where he and I passed out last night.

"That's more your problem than mine, considering I probably won't survive this," I retort while I reach down and pick up the piece of junk spear the Dagda made me take. I right myself and sweep a hand toward the edge of the lake. "Shall we?"

"Yes, let's hasten to our deaths." Fitspur bends down to retrieve his father's ax and then gestures for me to go first. "Her majesty does have a point, though. Without her, you'll have to drain years off your own life to cast any spells."

"We can't risk her on reconnaissance," I respond as if I've calmly thought it through, though my decision to have the Elytra protect her was more of knee-jerk thing. "Whatever occurs I'll just have to handle it."

We approach the shore of the lake with increasing trepidation. Doesn't stop us from exchanging witty banter, though.

"Did you really run for the lake as soon as you saw it?" Fitspur asks.

"Like my ass was on fire," I reply. Fitspur laughs for a moment, then grows serious. He glances at my ears. "They are not pointy," I assure him. "My parents were the least elvan folk you could imagine."

He frowns, recalling our many conversations as we played cards in the dungeon. "Your mother was a tavern maid, was she not?"

Dealer in a Reno casino. "She was," I reply because it's the best description for what she did.

We slow down as we enter the cattails, looking about us with sharp glances, but it's pointless. The cattails are taller than even Fitspur's seven-foot-and-then-some height.

"And your father was a traveling minstrel," Fitspur says. His voice is tight now. Talking is a tactic. He's trying to keep us both calm.

"Uh-huh," I murmur, my volume dropping.

My dad was a musician in a semi-decent cover band that toured eleven months out of the year. Until he got cancer. Then, he was home all the time. Well, whenever he wasn't at the clinic, getting his chemotherapy, that is.

I spent more time with my dad in the year he was dying than I did in the twenty years that had preceded it. It turned out to be just enough time to understand what an interesting and charming guy he could be, and why my mother loved him so much she decided that life wasn't worth living after he was gone. Even though that meant leaving me.

"My parents were not exactly gentle folk," I say, both cringing and smiling at the memory of my mom teaching me how to play beer pong. She wasn't a classy lady, but she sure was a heck of a lot of fun. "And elves, they certainly were not. Besides, elves can't do magic."

Fitspur looks at me askance. "Can you?"

"Funny," I reply.

We both stop at the same time, our toes touching the very edge of the lake. The water laps towards us, and then, as if it has tasted us, it starts to lap *away* from us at a more urgent speed.

"They'll be coming now," Fitspur whispers.

I wish I knew what "they" were. I haven't asked Fitspur because it seems like every time I ask what the Enthra are, the only answer I'm given is that they belong to Asphodel. Which is like asking what kind of pants a man is wearing and being told "his."

The ripples in the water come to an unnatural halt, like a drawn breath held before a scream. It's an "oh shit" moment.

Fitspur and I stare at the water, crouched and flexing. Our weapons are raised at the ready for the onslaught to begin. When it does, the first thing I think is, *the Enthra are mermaids?*

Yes and no, it turns out.

They are all female, and they all had long, flowing hair and faces that were obviously beautiful once. Those faces haven't aged, they've rotted. The fishy end of them, rather than being an enchanting, iridescent fish fin, is a hodgepodge of different and less winsome sea creatures. Some of them have the curled tails of seahorses, some have crab legs, and some are tentacled like an octopus or a jellyfish. Color-wise, all of them are as far from iridescent as you can imagine. They are the gray-green color of putrescence, and it seems as if even they can't stand the tattered, necrotic

condition of their skin because most of them tear at themselves as much as they try to tear at Fitspur and I in their mad, swarming attack.

I know that you're probably thinking that if they're mermaids, just get out of the frigging water, right? Because anything with an aquatic back end is useless on land. The problem is that the lake seems to be in cahoots with the Enthra. As in, the lake rises to engulf Fitspur and I like a wet hand. We go from toe-deep to completely submerged in a heartbeat, and we're still standing on the damn shore. The lake moved. And the Enthra are now attacking us from inside it. Not for nothing—but enchanting the water of an *entire* lake? That's a kickass spell. And, like, super hard to do. Asphodel is so good. I hate him.

The Enthra are ripping at our flesh with ragged fingernails and chewing on our limbs with broken teeth. I have this *ick* response and flap about for a bit, thinking about all the bacteria getting into my bloodstream. To make matters worse, it's not like Fitspur and I can retaliate in any meaningful way. Fitspur tries to swing his ax, but his momentum is markedly impaired by the drag of water. I know how that particular ax drags through thin air like gravity has grown exponentially around it and, in the water, Fitspur is essentially holding an anchor.

I realize that my spear is a much better weapon for this medium as it is more streamlined than Fitspur's ax. Also, I haven't dropped it, which seems highly improbable. I spare it a glance amidst the fray and notice that it's like it's stuck to my hand even though I'm getting pummeled from many sides. I take ahold of it and thrust it at the nearest jellyfish-maid. It drives right through her and she explodes. The area is suddenly full of chum, and I am thrown back. I thrust at another Enthra, and she explodes, buffeting me back. And another. I get pushed over to Fitspur and harpoon one of the crab-maids snipping bits of his skin off with her claws. I give her a little jab and she explodes, pushing us both away.

I could do this all day, but I need air. I'd also like to not be swimming in guts. Maybe I can create a bubble down here around me and Fitspur? As I think this, the Ouroboros writhe under my skin. One of them picks up its head and glares at me, then rolls its eyes at me as if to say *finally, the lunk-head has figured it out*. Cheeky.

Magic bubble it is, then. It's probably one of the simplest spells in a sorcerer's toolbox, and it takes very little life force to generate it.

Impossible to chant underwater though.

Oh—now I get it. Wow. Asphodel is *such* a bastard. As soon as you realize what spell you need to get to Avalon alive, you are deprived of the one thing it takes to say it. Air.

Well, I guess I've got no chance. All I have is this spear the Dagda gave me that seems to be very good at making Enthra explode, but not good at doing anything that could possibly give me air.

Or maybe it can. I notice that every time one of the Enthra explodes on contact with the spear, it creates a shock wave that blows me back.

I put myself in front of Fitspur and gesture upwards at him—or what I believe to be upward as it has the most twinkling of light and the least amount of entrails. I point to my mouth and try to say something and all that comes out are bubbles. He seems to understand I need air. We both start swimming for the glimmer of light that just might be the sun.

The Enthra tear at us as more frantically, and I know that we're going the right way. I stab downward at them with the Dagda's spear, and with each Enthra death, Fitspur and I are hurled closer to the light.

At the last moment before we crest, Fitspur makes a basket of his hand, puts it under my foot, and launches me above the surface. I gasp and sputter on my trajectory upwards, and then as quickly as I can, I blather the necessary spell before I hit the water again.

I feel the Ouroboros on my wrists sting, as if one of them has bitten me. What a punk. I don't know how much of my life I've drained by saying that spell, but it can't be that many years because I still feel like a young man when I hit the water.

Though I don't really hit the water, I just sort of sink down into it surrounded by air. And I keep sinking, which doesn't make much sense. If I'm in a bubble, shouldn't I float? Oh, who cares? It's magic. It doesn't always have to make sense.

Beneath me, I see Fitspur fighting for dear life. I have no idea how to drive this bubble toward him faster. He gets away from the Enthra who is trying to tear his eyes out and kicks toward me, entering the bubble with a mighty gasp. He continues to sputter and cough on his hands and knees supported by the bottom of the bubble. So, supported by air? Doesn't need to make sense—this is magic. I'm just going with it.

The Enthra swarm our bubble and reach their arms inside, trying to grasp us and pull us out. I move Fitspur away from them and jab a few with my spear to keep them off while Fitspur gathers himself. The bubble sinks to the bottom of the lake and we put our feet down. The sand squashes beneath our feet.

Fitspur recovers and stands, hefting his ax. He looks up at the Enthra massing above and around our dome of air. They don't try to enter because they know that in here, they will be helpless against us.

"What do we do now?" he asks.

"I guess we walk?" I suggest.

Fitspur and I trudge back to shore with the bubble around us, leaking green and red blood, respectively, but mostly whole.

Fitspur glances over to nod at me. "Not bad, Merlin," he says.

Fitspur was completely right about the fact that Isfin was going to be furious, and I was completely wrong about that fact that I was going to die. Which leaves me holding the bag as far as Isfin goes. Fitspur and I trudge out of the lake and walk up the bank, and are met by a very brief moment of relief, followed much too quickly by Isfin's angry barrage.

I don't even try to interrupt her, let alone defend myself while she rips into me. I nod while she calls me everything from idiotic to underhanded and back again because, frankly, I deserve it. It was a dirty trick, but I don't give a rat's ass because she's okay and that's all that matters to me. Isfin stomps around, pacing back and forth among the semi-circle of her Elytra with flushed cheeks, waving hands until she finally stops and stares at me.

"Well? Do I, or don't I?" she demands.

I scroll back through the last few things she yelled at me, but honestly, I was too distracted by the fact that the tip of her nose turns as red as her cheeks when she's angry to remember what she was yelling.

"You do? Don't. Do?" I guess, changing my answer repeatedly as I see Fitspur's wince deepen until it falls into grimace territory. What was Isfin saying—ah yes! I remember. "You are completely in charge, your majesty, and you give the orders," I say.

She narrows her eyes at me. "Why do I feel like you're lying?"

"It's not that I'm lying," I hedge.

"Then what are you doing?"

“Leaving some room for interpretation.” I hold up a hand to stop her before she gets going again. “Look, it doesn’t matter if I make it to Avalon. It matters if *you* and Fitspur make it. Asphodel *must* die, but we need Calx to kill him. Your majesty seems to be the only one who knows enough about the sword to retrieve it, and Fitspur is the only one pure of heart enough to wield it. Fitspur can bloody well look after himself, but you, your majesty, are far too precious to risk so that I may go have a gander at the Enthra and figure out what the hell they even *are* to begin with.”

Isfin and Fitspur suddenly look down, abashed, but unable to naysay me.

“Now, can we please go?” I continue, gesturing toward the lake. “I’ve discovered the spell that will get us across, but we must still walk there across the bottom of the lake, and it’s quite a long way.”

There are a few more fraught glances between Fitspur and Isfin, and then she pushes past me.

“You’ve really stepped in it, Merlin,” Meomi warns.

“Don’t care.” I watch Isfin stalk to the side of the lake and join her at a much less aggrieved pace. I lift my arms and breathe in to say the spell. Isfin kicks me in the shin.

“Don’t squander the Ouroboros,” she snaps. She motions to herself in an aggravated way. “I’m standing right here.”

“I know, your majesty,” I reply, not sure what she’s talking about yet.

“Idiot,” she mumbles, angry with me again as she takes my hands in hers. “Take my essence to fuel your magic when we are together so you might save the power of the Ouroboros for yourself. It will fade to nothing if you keep using it at this rate.”

“Oh, right,” I say, glancing down at my tattoos.

I guess they do seem a bit less crisp than they did before. I must have drained them rather than my life force to say the bubble spell. Maybe it’s a little late in the game for me to be putting all this together, but it’s not like magical talismans come with a set of instructions that download into your brain as soon as they become a part of your body. I don’t even remember getting the Ouroboros, let alone ever being given any instructions for how to use it.

“I shall be more careful with the gift your father has given me, your majesty,” I reply with forced cordiality.

Her eyes twinge with reproach. And I know I'm acting like a cold bastard again, but only because I have to. I'm not going to make it if I go through this whole quest with my heart on my sleeve. I look away from her while I take her essence to cast the bubble spell. I don't require much of her essence for this, but it's still something passing between us. A piece of her dissolved in me, I suppose, and though I take from her, I am losing a greater part of myself.

But what I feel for Isfin is inconsequential. Killing Asphodel has always been my quest, and when I have aided her and Fitspur in the doing of it, I will be released from here. And from her. And maybe this time I will learn my lesson about tagging along after women who love some other man more than me.

I cast the largest *Bubble* spell I can, but there is a limit to how big it can be. This spell doesn't let you make an underwater bubble that's bigger than twenty feet around before it collapses. A twenty-foot sphere is a decent size, certainly, but I don't know if there will be enough air inside to last us all the way across the lake bottom. I may even have to float up to the surface to cast a second bubble with fresh air in it if we run out.

With that troublesome thought in my head, we set off across the silty bottom of the lake encased in my bubble. The Enthra swarm around us, reaching in as far as they dare. Some of them reach too far and flop inside the bubble, only to be skewered and left for dead as we continue. Their bodies join the water again as the bubble passes them by, leaving them to float up behind us. This lake is deep, and from what I see, there must be thousands of Enthra in it. I'm a little afraid that if they all rush us at once, we could be overwhelmed.

I glance back to see if Isfin is still pinned between the Elytra and Fitspur like the meat in a very grouchy queen sandwich.

"You know, I can defend myself," she complains after being smooshed, yet again, between Meomi and Fitspur while they dispatch of another floundering Enthra—who, ironically—looks like a flounder.

"Yes, your majesty," Fitspur says, still grimacing at the Enthra entrails left on his father's ax. "But I would rather you didn't."

"And why is that Prince Fitspur?" Isfin inquires while she sidesteps the fishy equivalent of roadkill.

Fitspur suddenly stops and faces her, his body curving over hers like a sexy bulwark. “Because I do not want these deaths on your conscience. The Enthra are pitiable creatures, and I know how hard you fought to break the spell enslaving them. I have no wish to see you forced to kill those you strove so hard to free. That would break my heart.”

Isfin drops her head and nods. “I thank you for this kindness to me, Prince Fitspur. I did search for a way to free them from Asphodel’s enchantment, only to learn that to free them one must first fight through them and free Calx from the stone. In truth, it would haunt me to kill any of these poor souls.” She looks up at him with a wry expression. “Though I think less of myself for passing that burden onto you.”

“Whatever burden you pass to me becomes weightless, for I could carry the whole world if it were for you.”

That’s how you woo a woman. With devotion and eloquence that is not even remotely pathetic. Not with passive aggressive, borderline emotionally abusive behavior as I have done.

Even now, while I’m staring at him—as Isfin, Meomi, and the rest of the Elytra are staring at him—he turns back to his duty of guarding the queen with no thought of what he could get out of saying what he just said. Because it’s not wooing to him, it’s how he feels. He tells Isfin the truth. I don’t know if I’ve ever done that. Not really. Certainly not *all* the truth because I’m not allowed to do that. I don’t know if it makes it easier or harder to give up Isfin, knowing that she is going to love someone as deserving as Fitspur.

“You said this is a spell?” I ask, toeing my most recent kill.

“Asphodel cursed them,” Meomi replies.

I don’t mention that it’s impossible to do a *Changing* spell on this many beings. That would require millions of life years—maybe billions, I don’t know. The calculations for this level of magic are ridiculous. It can’t be a *Changing* spell, then.

“What were they before? And why did Asphodel do this to them?” I ask instead.

“They were sirens,” Isfin answers. “Sirens had been neutral for centuries—neither Seely nor Unseely. They had just been allowed admittance into the Seely court when they betrayed us. The Lady of the

Lake tricked Asphodel, stole me away, and delivered me to the Unseely. It was how I was captured and nearly put to death.”

“The Lady of the Lake was a siren?” I repeat because I’m not buying it. I’ve read many versions of the Arthurian Legends, and none of them had mentioned anything like that. “You expect me to believe she was part fish?”

“Only when she was in the water,” Isfin replies, shrugging one shoulder at my seemingly nonsensical disbelief. “How else could there be a lady living in lake unless she were?”

“Fair point,” I remark as I slay another Enthra.

The more I see of them, the more I pity them. Some still have faded jewels about their necks, others have mother-of-pearl combs still tangled in their slimy hair. The dredges of beauty are still clinging to them, making them more horrific, and more pathetic. How Asphodel accomplished this is beyond me, and that is very bad news for all of us because I’m supposed to be able to best him somehow. I can’t even figure out how he accomplished half his feats of sorcery, let alone how to counter them.

No time to spiral into my own self-defeating thoughts, though. The irresistible pull toward Avalon grows more urgent inside me the closer we get to it, which is helpful in that I believe I could feel my way toward the island blindfolded. As such, I have no worries of getting lost or disoriented even in the growing darkness that surrounds us.

The Elytra’s swords begin to flame with that blue fire I saw at my first meeting with them, and it seems to scare the Enthra back some. Yet even so, the closer we get to Avalon the more emboldened the Enthra become. They surround our bubble five-deep, or possibly more, but I lose count in the murk of the deepening water. They start shoving each other, pushing the front line of Enthra in on our bubble. They are tumbling in every second now, and we’re having to move more quickly across the lakebed, or be crowded out of the bubble by their piled-up bodies.

“Merlin, have you a spell to get us there more quickly?” Meomi asks with mounting unease as she slays Enthra after Enthra.

“If they fall in on us as one, we won’t be able to repel them,” Fitspur clarifies, though I hardly need him to.

They all spare me anxious glances whenever they can manage to look away from the blizzard of Enthra that are now swirling around the bubble.

“Ramsay!” Meomi barks at me.

“Yes, yes!” I snap as I stab feverishly at flopping fish women.

I cast my gaze about looking for—I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m looking for. I can’t see a damn thing, anyway. It’s become almost completely dark down here. How do they even *see*? I spare one second to inspect my latest kill and notice that she has enormous pupils. I glance up and notice how the Enthra all come at the Elytra’s glowing swords with their eyes screwed tight. Then it finally dawns on me.

I dive for Isfin and take her hand in mine. “May I?”

“Of course!” She shouts back. “Whatever you’re going to do, do it quick—”

A blindingly bright orb appears in my hand. All the Enthra shrieks carry through the water like shock waves, and they clutch at their faces as if to claw out their eyes. Our party fares only slightly better, moaning and turning away spasmodically from the offending light.

“Sorry!” I shout, still squinting myself. “Probably should have warned you.”

It’s still no cake walk to Avalon. Though blinded, the Enthra continue to throw themselves at us. Many of them miss, so that’s a good thing, but to avoid being overwhelmed our party is forced to run across the treacherous bottom of the lake and there’s a lot of crap down here. Mostly rocks, bones, and the wreckage of ships, all of which is slippery and mushy, and an all-around pain in the ass to get through. We run, then jog, then finally limp across the bottom of the lake toward Avalon for what seems like hours.

Ankles twisted, knees and palms skinned raw by multiple falls, we pull ourselves up the steep incline to the beach. The Enthra still claw and flop toward us as our party crawls up on the sandy shore.

“Piss *off*!” Meomi screams as she chops the head off what appears to be the final Enthra. Then she collapses onto the sand between Isfin and Fitspur, panting.

We lie on our backs as we catch our breaths. To my right, Isfin turns her head to Meomi and the two of them dissolve into laughter. They are positively giddy. Fitspur picks up his head so his worried eyes can meet mine over them.

“It’s all right, they haven’t lost their wits,” I tell him. “I can feel it too. This place is... invigorating.” It’s a paltry description for the rush I feel right now.

“But if you can feel it,” he says, propping himself up on an elbow while the girls giggle between us, “then why aren’t you...?” he gestures to their rolling, twisting joy.

“Because I’m trying to figure out what Asphodel has planned next,” I tell him. I think on it for a moment and add, “but it is lovely. This feeling.”

I trail off musingly while I assess the wave of foamy happiness swelling in my chest. For a moment I allow myself to lie here and listen to Isfin, Meomi, and the rest of the Elytra. They shout happily, and sing to each other in elvish as they all lay on the beach under the sun. They have beautiful voices, and Elvish is a musical language, luminous with enchanting sounds.

I feel something swimming about my wrists and I lift them up above my head to look at my Ouroboros tattoo. The ink is onyx-black again, as if it had just been reapplied, and the snakes seem more detailed, more real than they ever were. They are three-dimensional; in both the way they look and the way they feel. They look like real snakes living under my skin, but that doesn’t gross me out. Probably because they seem happy, which is a big switch from what I have always sensed as ambivalence towards me. This might be the first time I don’t feel like the little shits are about to slither up my veins and into my body where they can chew out my organs.

“Should we just let them dance like that?” Fitspur asks, the faintest taint of anxiety souring his otherwise warm tone as he gestures towards the Elytra who have risen from their prone states and have begun cavorting before us. “You mentioned Asphodel might have more planned.”

Yes, I did. And then I allowed the serenity of this place to overcome the low-level panic and general paranoia that had become the baseline of my existence as Asphodel’s apprentice.

“Stop them!” I sit up abruptly, already fearing I am too late. “Everyone must stay still!”

As I’m gaining my feet, I hear several screams.

“Don’t let her move!” I command, pointing at Fitspur. He dutifully pins Isfin beneath him while I sprint toward the last pair of flailing arms I see. The Elytra are being swallowed by the sand.

I dive for a pair of reaching hands, clawing my way toward her terrified eyes. It’s the Elytra who looks like Pocahontas. Her fingers snap out of mine.

“No, no, you can’t!” I say to Asphodel, though I know he’s not here, as her face gets swallowed up in sand. I start to dig.

I feel someone grab me by the shoulders and toss me through the air backwards. I land hard, but I am past angry, and I don’t really care. I get up again and run for the hole that is now barely a dent in the sand. Fitspur’s arms stop me as surely as a brick wall.

“She’s been taken, brother. All the Elytra save Meomi are gone,” he says, grunting, as I struggle against him. “Do you know any spells that can raise them?”

I stop fighting and think. Is there a spell? *Magic rope*? No. It’s invisible. She wouldn’t know to grab the other end. *Stairs in Air*? I don’t think it can be cast through the sand. *Levitation*? I have to physically touch her to cast it. *Finder*?

Nothing fancy. Just get her out. We’re almost out of time.

I cast a *Finder* spell but see no glimmer of light to show me where she is. I hear no voice calling out to me so I may follow. It’s as if she’s not anywhere. I cast a *Shield* spell on my hands to protect them and I dig down until the sand floods with water.

“You bastard!” I scream at the water seeping into the bottom of the hole.

I feel myself begin yanked up from under my armpits as Fitspur hauls me up again. I push him off me and clutch at my hair. The gentle tide of the lake laps at my ankles as I tug on my scalp, as if that small pain will distract me from the larger pain of failure. I look up at my companions and make a quick head count.

Isfin, Meomi, Fitspur and I are all that are left. I meet Isfin’s hopeful gaze. That hope I see in her—hope for her friends, hope that I might be talented enough to fix this—crushes me. Because I’m not.

“I’m sorry, your majesty. The thought of a sand trap should have occurred to me before we made the beach, but I...I should have...” *been better*, I think, but I don’t have the guts to say it out loud because it doesn’t matter that I have the Ouroboros, or the title of Merlin, or Isfin’s nearly indefatigable power to fuel my spells, when Asphodel is better than me. He’s just better than me, and if I don’t somehow become as good as he is, we’re all going to die.

“Is there nothing you can do?” Isfin asks. Her arms are caked with sand. She must have tried to dig to save them as I did.

I can't answer her. And that answers her question.

Isfin drops her head as a single sob escapes her. Meomi, who already has her arms tightly wrapped around the queen's shoulders to restrain her, loosens her embrace until it becomes one of comfort.

Fitspur looks at me as if to ask, "now what?"

He's not trying to rush me, but he's rushing me. We are essentially stuck in the place we are standing. None of us dares to move for fear of being swallowed by the sand, but I know that just because we stand on solid ground now does not mean it will remain so. The spells Asphodel set could be moving around beneath us, like in a video game where squares on the floor turn into thin air, or lava beneath your avatar if it stands there long enough. Even the air around us is unsafe. Spells aren't always in the ground. Sometimes they are like nets that you walk into, or that drop onto you. Magic is three dimensional. We must get off this beach.

I have an idea. It's a terrible one. It's dangerous and there are a million ways it can go sideways, but at least it will get us from point A to point B with absolutely no chance of us stumbling over another one of Asphodel's trap spells.

I look at Isfin who is quietly wiping at the tears streaming down her cheeks. She's lost all but two of her dear friends because of me.

We've been whittled down on purpose. I know this because I know Asphodel. He's pushing me around like a pawn. That's my mistake. I must stop being a piece on the board, take the seat across from him, and play.

"Your majesty. Do you know *exactly* where we are and *exactly* where we're going?" I ask. I don't bother to ask Meomi, for though she's an elf, I know that she's too young to have ever lived on Avalon.

Isfin nods and sniffs, collecting herself. "I do."

"Can you picture the journey there clearly in your head?"

She frowns in thought. "It's been many years. I imagine it's changed since then."

I shake my head. "I'm not talking about the vegetation or the buildings along the way. If you know a place well enough, you can get there without moving a single step. Do you know our destination in relation to this place? Can you picture it very clearly in your head?"

"Yes," she replies without hesitation. Then she smiles, her breath fluttering in the aftermath of tears. "I could walk from here to there with my

eyes closed.”

“Good,” I say. I know what I’m about to ask will be hard to hear so I say it gently. “Would you let me see inside you so I might bring us there?”

Isfin’s face blanches. Fitzpur and Meomi gape at me in concert. “What?” they all ask.

I hold up my hands as if to ask them to stop, aware that I have very little time to explain this.

“Your majesty is very good at cards, but magic is not like cards. It’s like chess,” I begin, though I don’t know if they have that game here or not. I’ve never seen it in the Ebon Spire, but since I have no other simile, I must explain.

“In chess both players have the same pieces, and both players can see all those pieces, and the moves of their opponent at all times. It’s not about bluffing, it’s about strategy. Asphodel’s strategy is to knock out his adversary’s pieces on the chess board in an order that leaves those left unable to meet the next challenge. It’s actually relatively easy to get to Avalon if you have the right pieces.”

“That was easy?” Meomi asks dubiously.

“For our particular party it was. Asphodel’s spells are made so that he can whittle down any group into a specific combination, and that way he designates which pieces are going to be on the chess board. He designed his spells so that any party that made it onto this beach would have needed a spell caster and an elf among them, and not many more. First, a *Bubble* spell can’t be any larger than the one I cast—so no army could make this beach. Second, no elf could make it here without magic, and no spell caster could have enough life to get here without an elf to power the *Bubble* spell all the way across the bottom of the lake. Third, Asphodel knew that if an elf made the beach, that elf would be filled with joy. That’s why he set a *Quicksand* spell over the beach. You dance or run around happily, and you die. Which brings us to this, his fourth move. The spell caster would need to cast a *Portal* spell to get over the *Quicksand*, but a *Portal* requires an enormous amount of energy and a deep knowledge of the area to cast it correctly. Which means the spell caster would need an elf—”

“Who probably just danced herself into a sandy grave,” Isfin finishes, seeing the conundrum Asphodel created. She suddenly brightens. “But I’m still here, so we’ve beaten his fourth move.”

“Not yet,” I warn. “The *Portal* spell requires the elf to allow the spell caster to do something extremely intimate and possibly distasteful, making this allowance a very improbable thing.”

“And what could be more distasteful than dying?” Fitspur asks.

“Her majesty would have to let me inside her mind,” I answer.

Isfin shuffles her feet uncomfortably. “What does that mean? Would you see *everything* in there?”

“No, that’s unnecessary,” I say. “I’ll find your first thoughts. Make sure they are about where we need to go. I will also see any memory associated with that place. Whatever pops into your mind, really, when you think about where we’re going. I’ll see it. Once I know the way there in my heart, I will take one single step and bring us all there.”

“I’m sorry, when you know the way in your *heart*?” Meomi repeats dubiously. “When, exactly, is that?”

“I told you, there is a lot of room for this to fail.” I meet each of their eyes in turn. “That’s how Asphodel plans on beating us.”

Isfin still looks uncertain. “Will you be able to see whatever you want?” she asks in a small voice.

“I could. But I won’t. You must trust me. If you don’t—if you shy away from me while I’m inside you...well,” I trail off. Neither she nor I can meet each other’s eyes. I can’t help the impatient tapping on my fingers on my leg. “Really, your majesty, you must make a decision soon.”

“Give her a moment. She’s only just—” Fitspur begins, but Isfin cuts him off.

“Just do it, and quickly,” she says. “Before I can think any more about it.”

“Yes, my queen,” I say, and then I reach out and take her hands in mine. “Fitspur. Meomi. Grab onto me and hold tight.”

They both wrap their strong hands around my upper arms and nod at me when they are secured. I feel Isfin’s hands in mine. They are gritty with sand, chilled with fear, and unaccountably precious to me.

“Try to remember a time when you went from here to there, or vice-versa. Be specific,” I say to Isfin. “I’ll be in and out as soon as possible.”

Isfin licks her lips, then shuts her eyes. “I trust you,” she whispers.

If we weren’t just about to die, that would probably kill me. I need to focus, or all of our atoms will be smeared through the air like lotion rubbed

into skin.

I can do this—without killing my friends in the process, either. Screw Asphodel and his brilliant strategy. He's such a dick.

The biggest spells are the easiest to say. They're usually short, too. Easy spells take forever to say because you have to lisp and growl your way through a dozen or so words of protection that are supposed to keep you from ending up a spiritual pancake. Powerful spells have no protection. They are gateways to huge things, and they are terrifyingly easy to open. The *Portal* spell is three syllables.

Sha-Valla

It's so easy. Like turning a doorknob. But what's on the other side of the door is the magical equivalent of a firing squad, and Isfin's memory hits me like a bullet.

I don't like being inside Isfin's mind.

It's not like watching a movie. It's not like reading a book. It's not even like when I looked into the mirror of Isfin's blood and found myself on a battlefield, submerged in one of Asphodel's memories. That felt real, but I was never Asphodel. I was merely an observer at that event.

This experience of being inside Isfin's mind is much more personal. I am still partly me, and that part is at liberty to notice things that she didn't in the moment, but I am also completely her as well. I feel everything she felt. I see the world from her child-like stature. I'm even a little confused about certain grown-up things, the way a child is. Like...

...why does Asphodel look so flushed? And why are his eyes so bright? Is it because he is to see Merrow? Is that what love does to you? If it is, I'm not sure I want it. He looks like he has an illness of some kind.

"Just let my apprentice take you. He will guard you with his life," Asphodel says. His apprentice steps forward.

...Shit. I, Ramsay, know that cravat. How many times have I watched it dance up and down as the ghost inside it spoke to me words that no one but Asphodel could hear? It is Michelander, the Ghost Suit. *He* was Asphodel's only other apprentice.

Asphodel looks down at me. Isfin. Me as Isfin. I really don't like this. I feel like a little child, and I am uneasy. I can sense that something is off, but I don't know what it is.

...“I don’t know...” I say, shifting from foot to foot. “My father said I should trust no one but you.”

Asphodel nods and bends a knee before me so we can be eye to eye. He always takes a knee when he has something important to say to me. I’ve always liked that.

“Your father and I are very similar,” he says. “We are slow to trust, but I trust Michelander with more than my life. I trust him with my heart and my honor. I trust him with you.”

Asphodel’s eyes are so round and piercing I giggle. He means everything he says, unlike most humans, but sometimes he is overly serious. My father calls it an excess of earnestness.

I look up at Michelander, who immediately drops down in front of me next to his master. He, too, is human as all sorcerers are, but he is not ugly as most humans are. My father told me humans can’t help it. They get injured, they get old, they wear their losses on their faces and in their bodies in a way the elves do not. I believe my father loves them for that, though I don’t quite understand why just yet. When I asked him, he told me it made every bit of them that was beautiful all the more so. I like that thought. That something could be beautiful because it is marked by loss.

Michelander, however, is like Asphodel. They are both as young and comely as elves. Michelander has dark skin, where Asphodel is white as the moon, but if asked I could not choose between these opposites and pick who was the more handsome one between them.

“Your Highness,” Michelander says, dropping his eyes in reverence and leaning deeper into his back leg. He flourishes a hand to indicate a bow upon an already bended knee. “It is my honor to watch over you for the short while my master requires.”

I tip my head downward, accepting this temporary arrangement. “Arise Sir Michelander. I surrender myself into your stewardship until your master returns.”

“My duty unto honor,” he swears in the old way. It’s irregular. Normally, he would swear his duty to me, but maybe he is nervous. He probably just wants to sound impressive.

This is all wrong. The part of me that is still Ramsay can see this scene unfolding in a way that the me who is young Isfin does not. I can see the

resolve in Michelander, and I know that no one needs to steel himself that much to make a vow unless he intended to break it.

Michelander walks beside little Isfin as she chatters on about this fern or that bush. They leave the beach and walk together into the interior of the island. Michelander is solicitous and asks many questions of the young princess about her island. He asks about the rainfall. The ever-present mists. The wildlife.

“Deer, of course!” Isfin laughs merrily. “My father is the Stag King. Sometimes it seems there are more deer than apples on Avalon.”

Michelander reaches up and picks a red apple from a low bough as he passes. He offers it to me, but I shake my head. I don't know why I don't feel like eating. My stomach growls with hunger, and the apples of Avalon are the most tempting food there is, yet my teeth clamp tightly around my dry tongue. I am too eager to return to my pool, I suppose. Asphodel has kept me on the other side of the island, moving me from citadel to citadel, for many weeks now. There has been talk of war with the Unseely and the Mirror Pool, though hidden from all but the initiated, is no fortress.

We follow the stream deep into the woods. Crystal-clear waters rush over smooth, mossy rocks. Oak trees bend their tangled roots around the worn boulders at their roots until we get to the Mirror Pool. Michelander gasps when he sees it. His face tilts up into one of the filtered, golden shafts of sunlight that pierce through the deep green of the leaves and his chest shudders with longing.

“It's beautiful,” he whispers.

“It is,” I agree.

This shaded dell around the Mirror Pool is my home, and it is the most beautiful place in the world to me. I sleep on beds of moss and white clover buds that endlessly bloom afresh beneath me. The trees curve their branches and make a canopy for my soft, cool bed. Eiderdown, lit from within by follow-me-lights, wafts through the misty air, but none of them land in the Mirror Pool. The water in there is unsullied by any fish, fowl, or vegetation. Not even a leaf dares drop upon its surface, and only I may touch the water of the Mirror Pool or drink from it. On its surface, sometimes, I can see the future. But not for many weeks as I have been away from my home for too long.

“Is that the Champion's Armor?” Michelander asks breathlessly.

A perfectly round, moss covered granite rock that sits high on the far side of the pool is lit by a shaft of golden light from above. The light shines upon a suit of armor that stands upon it, making the green scales light up like emeralds.

"It is," I reply.

I, Ramsay, see the gleam in Michelander's eye. I see the greed written there, but Isfin does not. She sees only the sacred beauty of her pool. There is a sound from behind, and Isfin turns to see a beautiful woman in a gray dress standing behind her. She feels fear. She looks down at the surface of the Mirror Pool. Images of fire and war flash across its dark, still surface.

"Forgive me, Queen Isfin, but I am Valerie, handmaiden to the Lady of the Lake," the woman in gray says.

"I did not permit you to come here," I tell her. I turn to look at Michelander, who tears his gaze from the woman in gray to look at me. "What have you done?" I demand.

"What I had to for love," he replies. His eyes go back to Valerie. They both look very sad.

I throw myself from Isfin's mind. I've seen enough. Too much. If taking her life force made me feel unbearably close to her, I don't know what to call this. I can still feel her nestled inside of me, like I'm a Russian doll, and she is at my center. I have to snap out of it.

I take a shaky breath and open the *Portal*. Our little group is sucked from the beach to the Queen's Glade in less time than it takes to react to the fact that the space between is infinitely cold and dark.

Everyone is tensed to scream at the sheer horror of infinity when we suddenly arrive at our destination. Screaming would have been impossible anyway. Our lungs have been squeezed tight by the vacuum of the wormhole. Ice cracks off us when we make our first moves, which far from being the heroic entrance that was most likely imagined by everyone here, probably looks more like a handful of drunks staggering out of a bar.

We nod stoically as we make sure no one lost a limb. Or a mind. We're trying to act like this is normal, like we're all too badass to be ruffled by something that didn't draw blood, but we're all freaking out on the inside.

Wormholes are not for biological beings. The complete absence of sensation of any kind is just too weird.

Isfin is the first to recover her dignity.

“Oh no,” she says. Her face is crestfallen and I stare at her for a moment too long while she processes what has become of her once beautiful home. It is a filthy swamp, filled with slime and rotting debris. She’s devastated, of course, and I would do anything to comfort her.

“It’s not real. It’s all part of Asphodel’s enchantment,” I remind her. “If we get the sword the spell is broken.”

Still staring at the Mirror Pool, Isfin points in alarm yelling, “Ramsay!”

I look in time to see something vaguely human-shaped rise out of a filthy pool of muck to attack us. I grab Isfin’s hand and cast a strong *Shield* spell, forming a dome above our party. A wave of putrid water comes down upon the shield and breaks apart. Once the water mixes with the muddy earth beneath our feet, the ground starts to move. Tiny blobs of clay use rudimentary arms to pull themselves out of the muck and start staggering around on newly formed legs. The creatures come up to about mid-calf, have no faces and no eyes with which to see, but still they stick out their finger-less arms and search for something to fight. I release the dome around us. The ground is made of dirt, and I don’t want to be trapped inside with them.

“Golems!” I yell at Fitspur.

“What do you want me to do?” he says, aghast to see a bunch of clay anger-babies rising from the muck of what was once Isfin’s idyllic dell.

“Chop their heads off!” I holler, lifting Isfin into my arms while I stomp down on the golems who are circling our feet. “They can’t do much.”

“But they can keep coming!” Meomi says as she hacks away at them. “Do we have a *goal* in mind?”

Isfin nods, completely serious. “On the far side of the Mirror Pool is a great boulder. Calx is there, driven into it.”

Our party tries to move as one, and we are met with a wall of golems.

“They’re trying to pin us down!” Fitspur howls as he fights.

I look behind us and see a wall of rocks. Fitspur and Meomi stand in front of Isfin and I, taking the brunt of the onslaught. Our companions fight ferociously, but we are quickly being pushed back.

“We can’t keep this up forever!” Meomi says. Her meaning is clear. This is on me again.

I shift Isfin in my arms and cast a *Heat* spell. Waves of blisteringly hot air shoot from the palm of my hand, baking the clay golems. Dozens of them stiffen and become immobile, but more climb over them.

Okay, that wasn’t it.

I’m so tired. Everyone is. Meomi and Fitspur can barely raise their arms. I haven’t slept in forever...wait. Is *Sleep* it? I cast a *Sleep* spell. Waves of golems fall to the ground, asleep. Our party is given one moment of peace amidst the onslaught. We look at each other, wondering if we won. Nope. More golems start wriggling up from underneath their sleeping kin to attack us.

“Are there *this* many pieces in chess?” Isfin remarks frantically.

She meant only to comment on our dire straits, but it reminds me. Asphodel’s strategy so far has been to whittle down his foes until there is either none, or so few they are missing the key players needed to complete the task at hand. Want to free a bunch of zombie sirens from their horrible fate? Sure. You just must kill most of them to do it. Need an army to fight all those zombie sirens? Sorry, you can’t get one across the bottom of their lake in a *Bubble* spell because they aren’t big enough to transport an army. Need an elf to cast a *Portal* spell? Well, she just danced herself into quicksand. Need a hero? He’s too busy defending everyone left from golems to pull the sword from the stone.

At every step Asphodel intuits the abilities and the character of the pieces on the chess board, and either uses this knowledge to kill them off, or demand that they fight against their very nature to accomplish the next task.

“Fitspur, you must go alone!” I yell at him. “You can make it to Calx, but not while you’re defending us.”

“I will not abandon you!” he shouts without even looking back at me.

“You *must*,” I argue. “It’s the only way to get Calx and end this!”

“You’ll be swarmed without me!”

He’s right. Fitspur holds one flank while Meomi holds the other. If he were to leave, we’d be overrun, which he’d never allow. I really don’t know how to convince Fitspur to *not* be Fitspur.

“Then Asphodel has already won,” I say quietly. Isfin looks up at me, dismayed. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have a spell for this,” I tell her. “Asphodel

knew that any hero worthy of pulling the sword from the stone would never leave those who got him here to fight the golems alone.”

“He’d never leave us by choice,” she mumbles, frowning. Then she raises her voice. “Prince Fitspur. As my Champion, I order you to retrieve Calx.”

He freezes. Then he glances over his shoulder with a pained look on his face and replies, “Yes, my queen.”

Fitspur wastes no time to follow her order. He barrels through the pile of writhing golems that are heaped in front of us and disappears into the gloom.

The golems fall in on us immediately. I put Isfin down on top of a rock slab that stands before the rock wall and press her into the stone while I jab at the little dirt maniacs with my spear. Meomi scythes through them with her sword. Isfin stomps on the ones that get past us with all her might, but I soon hear her squeal as she is pulled down.

“To the queen!” I order, and Meomi falls back with me.

We pull the heap of golems off Isfin and throw them as far as we can rather than kill them. At this point their dead bodies have become as much of a hindrance as the living ones. Yet even as we hurl golems away, we are smothered by more.

“Get behind me!” I shout, stepping onto the rock slab. I cast a *Shield* spell and barricade us against the wall. The golems quickly pile up outside of it until we are well and truly buried.

“Can they get in?” Meomi asks, panting. Her eyes are wildly scanning the invisible dome that protects us while little clay bodies thump against it.

“No. But neither can air,” I admit.

“How long do we have?” Isfin asks.

“I don’t know.” I look around the small area we are crammed into and make a guess. “Fifteen, twenty minutes?”

“Come on Fitspur,” Meomi whispers, rooting for him.

“He’ll come back in time,” Isfin says.

“If he lives,” I caution. “I have no idea what spells Asphodel may have set around Calx. I’m not trying to dishearten you, but I think we should all be prepared.”

Isfin looks away from me and smiles knowingly. “He’ll live.”

Her tone gives me pause, but only because I sense more in it than blind faith. I can hear her love. She really loves him. I know because I've *been* her and I can read her better than I've ever been able to read anyone. I look away from her determined face as the last of the daylight is snuffed out by the pile of golems.

Meomi's sword starts to glow faintly, and in its eerie blue aura we wait, trying not to breathe. The golems suddenly stop moving, lose their shape, and turn into mud which starts sliding down the invisible dome of my *Shield*. We wait a moment, expecting something else terrible to happen. It doesn't.

"Does that mean Fitspur made it?" Meomi asks, looking at me hopefully.

"Let's find out," I reply, releasing my spell.

Clods of mud splat down on us. Once I wipe the muck from my forehead, I notice that the ground is quivering oddly, and I hold Isfin and Meomi back out of caution, but soon let them go.

A transformation is taking place. Shoots of grass begin to push up from the mud, as if on fast forward. Healthy trees sprout from rotting stumps, flowers stretch up from the ground and bloom, and the air goes from rank and foggy to fresh and clear in moments.

"Your majesty!" Fitspur yells from a distance.

We see him running toward us around the edge of the Mirror Pool, carrying a dark sword, and we rush to meet him. Isfin hurls herself at him with relief. He catches her up to his chest with one arm, careful to hold the dark and faintly smoking sword away from her while Meomi and I hang back and watch them with stiff smiles and bruised hearts, like two sad runners-up in a beauty contest. Fitspur returns the queen to her feet and stares bashfully at his own.

"See you got Calx, then," I say, gesturing to the faintly disappointing hunk of metal in his hands.

He holds it up, inspecting it. "It burst into flames when I pulled it out," he says, by way of an apology for the sword's current blackened state. "It was all shiny while it was in the stone. The edge is diamond, I think."

"Was it hot?" Meomi asks.

Fitspur shrugs. "Not really."

"Huh," Meomi and I muse in tandem.

“It would be unbearably hot to anyone who was unworthy, but not for Prince Fitzpur,” Isfin explains, making him blush even harder.

“Sorry we missed your big moment,” I say. “It would have been nice to see you pull a flaming sword out of a giant rock.”

“It was impressive. I held it aloft and everything,” he says in the most anticlimactic way ever. Then he gets down on his knees and holds Calx up with both hands, as if serving it to Isfin on a platter. “For you, my queen.”

Isfin grips the pommel of the sword as if she is shaking hands with an old friend. Her lips curve in a soft smile and she holds the sword aloft. It glows, but does not burn. The glade seems to answer the sword and a bright light pulses around Isfin like a halo for a moment before it dims.

“Rise, Whumpson,” she says, her face still alight. Fitzpur does as commanded. “You will bear this sword for me as my champion and the champion of Avalon henceforth.”

“Yes, my queen.”

As Fitzpur takes the sword from her, I notice a ripple moving across the surface of the Mirror Pool behind him. I bring my spear to the ready, alerting everyone else. Weapons drawn, we watch as a woman, covered in blisters and smoking sores, breaks the surface frantically and scrabbles out of the water and onto a wide, flat rock at the edge of the pool. Her bent head lolls in exhaustion between her quivering arms while her fishtail turns into legs. Her skin stops smoking, but the blisters remain. It’s as if she’s been swimming in acid.

“Merrow,” Isfin murmurs. She takes a step toward the siren as if to comfort her and my hand shoots out automatically to hold her back. Isfin’s eyes flash at me and she tries to wrench her arm out of my grasp. “She’s the Lady of Lake!”

“Who *betrayed* you,” I say, not letting her go.

Merrow looks up at us, panting through bared teeth. She is beautiful, despite the touch of batshit crazy in her eyes and the red blisters which are rapidly fading. Her long hair seems to drape itself over her lady bits in a way that is practically sentient as well as sexy. There’s a lot going on there, is all I’m saying, and I get why Asphodel got his chain mail in a twist over her.

“I’ve paid for that betrayal a million times over, thanks to your champion,” she says.

“My champion no longer, thanks to you,” Isfin rebuts. “Asphodel has become a scourge to all magical folk. He seems bent on killing us.”

“He told me he would do as much when he imprisoned me in this pool.” She pauses a moment and then asks, “Are all my sirens dead?”

“Some have survived.” Isfin gives me a nod to let me know she will be cautious, and I release her so she may approach Merrow. I stay close to her though. Merrow may be the Lady of the Lake, and that obviously means something to Isfin, but not to me.

“Why did you do it?” Isfin asks.

For a moment Merrow looks at Isfin as if she can’t believe Isfin doesn’t know the answer to that already. Then she gestures ruefully to the Mirror Pool.

“We all wish to see the future. I was persuaded by the Unseely that the elves had no right to horde that treasure for themselves. It wasn’t until Asphodel had trapped me beneath the surface of the pool that I felt its burning curse toward all but you.”

Isfin shakes her head, her face twisted with regret. “The future in the water is but an image only I can see, and even then, only faintly. You could have had a *real* future with Asphodel. He loved you.”

“It was not me he loved,” Merrow insists. “There was someone else, long before. I merely reminded him of her.”

“Before?” Isfin asks, confused. She searches her mind. “Impossible. That would make Asphodel older than me.”

Merrow’s eyes get that batshit gleam in them again. “Asphodel has been here longer than all of us. He’s the *First*.”

“Impossible,” Isfin whispers, stunned.

Merrow gestures to the sword in Fitspur’s hand—its diamond edge glinting within the blackened blade. “You may kill his body a thousand times, but he will always return, unless he is uprooted at his source.”

“What is his source?” Fitspur asks.

Merrow gathers herself and stands upon her scorched and shriveled legs. “Somewhere, there is a book that was never a book. In it is Asphodel’s true self. This shadow of him that you fight will never go away until the book is read.” She frowns. “Or destroyed. In truth, I’m not sure which. That is all I know.” She starts to stagger away from us.

“Wait. Where are you going?” Isfin calls after her.

“To my sirens, and justice,” Merrow replies.

“They’ve suffered for thousands of years because of you. They’ll kill you,” Meomi says, her expression a combination of confusion and pity.

“As would be their right.”

Isfin takes a step to follow Merrow, but I hold her arm.

“Leave it,” I tell her quietly. Her eyes round with sadness as she watches the once great Lady of the Lake disappear amongst the trees, but she does not try to follow her.

“A book that was never a book?” Fitspur repeats. “Do you know what that means, Ramsay?”

“Not a clue,” I say, looking around until I find a nice rock to sit on. I lower myself onto it gingerly. I feel like I’ve pulled every muscle in my body. “Asphodel kept scrolls in his library, and a couple of enormous tomes that were way too big to be called *books*. I’ve read all of them. None of them contained his essence.”

“Well, if it could erase his existence, he wouldn’t keep it in his library for anyone to rifle through, now would he?” Meomi asks.

“I don’t know,” I snap back at her. God, I’m tired. “He had a desk which he kept locked. I’d always assumed there were spells in it, but maybe not.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Isfin interrupts calmly before Meomi can yell at me for snapping at her. “Once we kill Asphodel’s body, we will have all the time we need to find this book that was never a book and kill his eternal self, or essence, or whatever it bloody is that keeps raising him from the dead. But *first* we have to return to the mainland and kill him.”

There’s no arguing with that, though easier said than done. I notice Meomi watching Fitspur fearfully. We’re all worried about him. He’s the one who has to kill Asphodel, which, even with Calx, is not very likely. I’ve seen both of them fight, and I know which of them is the better swordsman.

“Did anyone bring anything to eat?” I ask peevishly, partly because I’m starving, but mostly to move the subject away from Fitspur’s pending death.

Isfin rolls her eyes at me. “This is *Avalon*, Ramsay.”

I shrug, nonplussed, and she sighs heavily and turns away. Moments later she returns and hands each of us an apple.

“Great. One apple,” I say.

“You really are an idiot,” Fitspur says, smiling affably as he sits next to me.

I bite into what I assume is a paltry snack and realize that he is right. I am an idiot. This apple is everything. I can't get enough of it but find that I am completely satisfied after I take my last bite. I am full, but not too full. I am revitalized, but I could still lie down and sleep if I decided I wanted to. I am at that perfect place where I find I neither need more food nor wish I had eaten less.

"Would you care for something else?" Isfin asks through a grin, knowing I've just had my mind blown. Meomi and Fitspur are sniggering at me from behind their half-eaten apples.

Rather than answer, I throw my apple core at Isfin. She ducks, shrieking. And just like that, I forget and then suddenly remember again that I can't have her. I can't keep doing this to myself. I stand up.

"I'm going to get some sleep," I announce. "Is there any place I'm not allowed to go on your island, your majesty?" I ask Isfin.

She's looking up at me, a little saddened and surprised by my abrupt ending to what was shaping up to be a pleasant evening.

"No," she says, looking away. "You are free to go anywhere."

"My thanks," I say bowing stiffly before wandering off to find some soft bit of moss upon which to rest my idiotic and, let's face it, totally heartbroken head.

I t turns out any old hillock on Avalon is more comfortable, more soothing, more perfectly climate-controlled than the most high-tech and thoughtfully engineered bed, and I am in the deepest, most rejuvenating sleep of my life when I feel a hand clasp my bare shoulder. I jerk awake to see Meomi crouched down next me in the thin light of dawn.

“What?” I ask. My body starts to flood with adrenaline out of habit. “The queen—?”

“Is fine. Though gravely upset by your behavior last night,” Meomi says, keeping her voice low.

I sit up and regard her. “I’m sorry I’m not as gallant as Fitspur.” Obviously, I’m not sorry at all.

She narrows her eyes at me. “I understand why you act the way you do—believe me, I understand, Ramsay. I see the way you look at her. But your behavior is distracting her. She was up all night.”

I rest my forearms on my drawn-up knees and run my hands through my hair, ashamed of my selfishness. I nod in acceptance.

“Okay,” I reply, looking around for my tunic, which seems to have wandered off. “I’ll be nice. I can manage it for one more day.”

Meomi pulls a face. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that by the end of this day I’ll either be dead or gone from here.”

She reaches behind me and grabs something. “You can’t leave,” she says, handing me my tunic. “You’re the Merlin.”

I fiddle with my inside-out tunic while I think. How do I frame this so I don't give away the fact that we are currently, in a book? "I was brought to this land by a powerful spell. I am here to kill Asphodel or die trying. Today is my last day to complete my quest. If I kill him, the spell will instantly bring me home."

Meomi stares at me. "Where is your home?"

"So far I shall never be able to return."

She plops down next to me, looking stricken. "I am very sorry to hear it."

"A part of me is sorry to say it." I look at the misty light coming through the leaves. It feels so *right* here. Like I belong. "And another part of me can't get away from her fast enough."

Meomi nods sadly. "I know what you mean." She glances over at me. "I will miss you, Ramsay."

I bump my shoulder against hers. "And I will miss you."

She lays the side of her head on my shoulder and we stay like that, keeping each other's secrets.

"Where the hell is everyone..." Fitzpur comes crashing through the trees in a foul mood, sees us together on the ground, and freezes like he just got hit on the back of the head with a rock. "Mimi? What are you doing here?"

He looks between the two of us, lingering on the fact that I'm bare chested, and I can see him spinning scenarios in his head. I'm just about to disabuse him of any notion that something intimate occurred between Meomi and I when she springs up to standing.

"That's none of your business," she informs him.

"Did you *lie* with him last night?" Fitzpur asks, his eyes wide.

"Woah—wait..." I interject, but Meomi steps right to Fitzpur and gets in his face.

"What's it to you if I did?" she taunts.

"Hey!" I shout.

Fitzpur points a finger at me. "Not a word out of you!" he roars. And I mean *roars*. Damn, he's really angry.

"Oh, yell your stupid head off!" Meomi shouts back at him, not the least bit cowed. "You're not my brother and you're not my lover."

Fitspur practically swallows his own tongue when she says *lover*. “I know I’m not—”

“Then what right do you have to yell at me or at Ramsay?” She waits, but it appears Fitspur is still trying to throw up his half-swallowed tongue, so she soldiers on. “The fact is that you have *no* right. I’ll do whatever I want with my body, and you can just shut the hell up about it!”

“Why are you all shouting? What is going on?”

Of course, Isfin shows up at this exact moment and sees the three of us all looking guilty, all worked up, and me half naked, like something really did happen between Meomi and I last night. Which of course it didn’t.

“Nothing!” I holler, jumping up to my feet. I pull my tunic over my head. “Absolutely nothing is going on. Okay? Now, can we all please just go and kill bloody Asphodel?”

I storm past everyone feeling very misunderstood. This has gotten completely out of hand. Just when I had committed myself to managing the whole love triangle thing, Meomi goes and turns the triangle into a rhombus.

It’s much farther back to the shore than I’d thought. I mean, I’d walked this path to the Mirror Pool when I was Isfin (still weirded out by that, by the way) so all of this is disturbingly familiar, but somehow it feels longer. Maybe I’m just impatient for this whole thing to be over. It’s like I’ve been slowly peeling off a bandage for days now and all I want to do is rip it off once and for all.

Also, I don’t want it to be over. I don’t want to go through the rest of my life knowing I’ll never see these people again. I watch Isfin and Meomi, who are many paces before me, walking and talking earnestly with each other. Even if I take Isfin completely out of the equation, I’m left with the fact that I *like* these people more than anyone else I’ve ever met. Friendship has never come as easily to me as it has here. And then there’s Fitspur. I look behind me to where he is purposely lagging so as not to walk beside me. I never had siblings, but when he calls me *brother*, I know it to be true.

Before we make it to the beach, I turn around and head back to him.

“Hold up,” I say, blocking his path.

“I have nothing to say to you,” he growls before pushing past me.

“Well, I have something to say to you.” He is walking fast now, and I’m forced to do a very unmanly sashay beside him to stay level. “Meomi came

to me—"

He halts suddenly and faces me, not letting me finish. "Did you ever stop to think about how Isfin would feel?" he asks, seething. "Maybe the women in your land are so in awe of your good looks ..."

"My *what*—?" I interject.

"...that they care not that you share your bed with so many of them," he continues. "But Isfin deserves to be treated better. And Meomi," here he stops, as if he can't stand his own thoughts about her, and must banish them before he continues. "Just because women throw themselves at you does not mean you have to catch them!"

I stare at him, speechless. I know that I've grown better looking since I arrived in Lucitopia, thanks to both my physical training and the image perks that being in a fictional story allows, but I'm certainly not so handsome that women would throw themselves at me. Am I?

"I did not lie with Meomi," I say flatly. He looks confused.

"You didn't?"

"No. She merely woke me this morning to scold me for upsetting Isfin with my surliness last night."

"Then, why would she—?"

"To get a rise out of *you*," I say, grinning. He still doesn't get it, and I can't straight out tell him that Meomi is in love with him, or she'll kill me. "Come on," I sigh, leading him onward. "Let's catch up to them."

He takes a few steps with me and then stops again. "And what about Isfin?"

I look away because I honestly don't know if I slept with her or not. I mumble evasively, "She chose you, didn't she?"

Fitspur draws breath to respond, but we are interrupted.

"Ramsay!" Isfin screams.

Immediately, Fitspur and I break into a run toward her voice. We clear the trees and take the beach at a sprint, where we see the cause of Isfin's alarm. Looming above she and Meomi is Lady Yxisis, the phoenix. Meomi has her sword out and the queen shielded behind her while Lady Yxisis hisses at them.

I run forward with my hands raised. "Everyone, calm down!" I say, putting myself between Meomi and Yxisis.

"I'll calm down when she stops lunging at us!" Meomi shouts at me.

The elves ran at me with sword drawn, Lady Yxisis says in my head. I warn them to stay back.

Why don't you just speak into their minds? I ask her. *Can they not hear you?*

I do not like them. I will not speak to them.

Are all phoenixes as stubborn as you?

Yxisis puffs smoke through her nostril slits. I suppose it's meant as a laugh.

"Put up your sword Meomi. She will not attack," I say, taking the role of translator.

"Lady Yxisis must leave these shores immediately!" Isfin demands.

I look at her in surprise. "She saved your life, majesty," I remind her. Not to mention mine and Fitspur's to boot.

"She knows better than to come here. Just because I no longer have archers to shoot her from the sky does not mean she is welcome. One breath from her and this island is nothing but soot."

"Ah-ha," I say, turning to Yxisis. "How did you get here, anyway? I thought nothing could fly here."

I am a phoenix, mage. I go where I please. Until last night this place was cursed, and not somewhere I would be pleased to go, yet now it is exactly what I need.

"Right, well. You can't stay," I say reluctantly. "I'm sorry, but the queen won't have it."

"Bloody right I won't have it," Isfin mumbles behind me.

I would not risk the anger of the elves were I not hunted on the mainland by the dark sorcerer. I must find a place to lay my clutch, and quickly. They come before the next moon.

Shit. I turn to Isfin. "She needs a safe place to lay her eggs. Asphodel's after her."

Also, there are many fat deer here.

Isfin rolls her eyes, looking tortured. "Though I take pity on her plight, I must think of my people, Ramsay. If the orchards of Avalon burn, the elves die. All of us."

I will not fire any part of this island--save the sand on the beach where I will make my nest. Eggs need fire.

"What if she promised not to burn anything but the sand?" I plead.

And you forgot to mention the deer.

“Yes, yes,” I say, giving Yxisis the stink eye for making me translate when she could easily do this herself. I turn to Isfin. “And she wants to eat your deer.”

Not all of them. Just the fat ones.

“I think she means just the old bucks,” I add because I know Yxisis will scold me if I don’t.

Isfin looks deeply troubled. “I would trust Lady Yxisis not to burn my island, and the bucks do need culling, but could she promise that her hatchlings would be as careful with their flame as she is once they start to leave the nest?”

Certainly not. Younglings burst into flames constantly.

I shake my head to answer Isfin’s question.

“Then you may not brood here, Lady Yxisis,” Isfin says with finality. “In recognition for the kindness you have shown me, you may hunt the deer on Avalon in perpetuity, if you can do so without allowing so much as one cinder to escape you. But I must insist you find another place to raise your highly flammable young.”

Lady Yxisis snakes her gilded head close to mine and fixes me with one of her enormous magenta eyes.

Having the fat deer is recompense from the elf-queen. But you promised me too, mage. You promised that you would repay me. I need warm sands for my eggs more than I need fat deer.

I’m sorry. But it is not my island to give.

She leans back and huffs sparks out her nostril slits. *Just like a sorcerer.*

Lady Yxisis unfolds her four wings, about to take off, but I can’t let it end like that. I step forward though her talons flash dangerously close.

“Lady Yxisis, wait! We go in all haste to kill Asphodel. When he is dead you will have your pick of brooding grounds and I will set protective spells on it myself, so that you need never fear for your young.”

Someone kicks me in the shin, probably Meomi, but I don’t care. I will not go back on my promise to Yxisis. I hold her gaze.

We shall see, mage.

Lady Yxisis spreads her wings and nearly flattens me with the downdraft as she lifts off. Then, she hovers. She holds her talons spread out before us at waist level.

Well, get in.

“Lady Yxisis will fly us across the lake,” I tell them, corralling everyone toward her talons, though they balk.

“Are you sure that’s such a good idea?” Fitspur asks.

“I have no wish to see the sirens again. Not after we killed half of them. You?”

“Good point,” he agrees.

I push Fitspur and Meomi into one claw before boosting Isfin up into the other with me. I don’t think about the arrangement that I force upon our group; I merely act upon the instinct to remain within arms-reach of Isfin in dangerous situations. Once we are spooned together inside Lady Yxisis’ talons, I note my error, while the more traitorous parts of my body note that Isfin’s bottom is pressed snugly against them. I try to think highly unsexy thoughts while she wiggles against me, searching for a more comfortable position. Nuns. Lizards. Lizard nuns.

“Could you sit still, please?” I ask in an unnaturally high voice.

“No,” she replies, frustrated. “I’m trying to turn around and face you. We need to talk.”

I’m not sure facing her will be any better. I’ll just want to kiss her.

“Say what you need to say. I’m listening,” I tell her, using my chin to smooth her hair down so it doesn’t end up in my mouth.

“Fine,” she says, no longer wiggling. “Why were you and Fitspur fighting this morning?”

“It wasn’t a fight, really. More like a misunderstanding.”

“About Meomi?”

“Right. You know that even though I was half dressed, it was not...there was nothing going on.”

She chuckles softly. “Yes. Meomi told me.” Then she frowns and grows unnaturally still. “And she also told me that you’re leaving.”

I close my eyes. “I am under a powerful spell. If I don’t kill Asphodel by the end of this day I will die. And if I do kill him, I will leave this land and return to my own.”

She is silent for a long time. “My father warned me that you were ensorcelled.”

I chuckle to myself. Of course, her father warned her about me. “There were conditions to my coming here that I could not avoid. And now I must

fulfill my promise.”

“I can’t tell what you’re thinking,” she sighs, and starts wiggling again. “Will you please let me turn around?”

I realize I am clutching her rather tightly. I loosen my hold to let her face me. Oh, yeah, this is much worse. Now I’m looking into her eyes.

“Would you stay if you could?” she asks.

“Yes,” I reply immediately. Buffeted by winds, and cradled in razor sharp talons while my pending death looms, it’s like there’s nothing else in the world but her soft body in my arms, and her eyes, so full of thought and feeling, meeting mine. “I would give anything to stay with you.”

That didn’t sound desperate at all.

Mage. We are here.

I barely have time to brace Isfin as Lady Yxisis back wings violently and then opens her claws, practically dumping us out. When I gain my feet again, I glare up at Lady Yxisis.

You could have given me a bit more warning, you know.

I am tired.

She does look a bit off-color. But before I can frame a question for Lady Yxisis in my mind Meomi’s voice interrupts my thoughts.

“What are we doing *here*?” she demands.

“Where’s here?” I ask, looking down at my feet. I’m standing on something very wet and squelchy. I lift my feet up and try to put them down on something drier, but there is no drier place.

“The Marsh,” Meomi replies despondently. “Quick. Let’s go before my mother—”

“Meomi!” shouts someone in an angry fifth grade teacher voice.

“—finds out we brought a phoenix,” Meomi finishes ruefully.

Lady Pendaris thunders toward us through the reeds, flanked by red-armored elves. None of them seem the least bit hindered by the pools of water and sodden tufts of emerald-green duck weed. The elves glide over the spongy earth as if it were solid ground.

“How dare you,” Lady Pendaris says, glaring daggers at Yxisis.

Lady Yxisis puts her golden beak under a wing and nibbles, looking supremely unconcerned.

“Is there any particular reason you brought us here, Lady Yxisis?” I ask aloud for everyone’s benefit.

The dark sorcerer comes with his army.

“She says that Asphodel is coming here,” I explain, though I suspect Lady Pendaris knows. Instead of a silk gown like the one she wore the last time I saw her, the leader of the Marsh Elves is decked out in wicked armor.

“He comes with thousands of Unseely and tens of thousands of his Enthra,” Lady Pendaris replies, nodding.

“So many?” Isfin asks. Her voice is breathy with shock.

“There is no hope we will win, yet nowhere to run.” Lady Pendaris looks at Meomi and her composure breaks. “Why did you come?” she begs.

While Meomi stammers wordlessly at what appears to be a rare display of emotion from her mother, a sea of blue armored elves approaches.

Lord Tantagel steps to the front of his warriors and kneels before Isfin with a rather dramatic flourish of one of his arms. I feel Lady Yxis stiffen with predatory interest.

Please do not eat him, I pray as much as ask. She grumbles in response but does not snap him up.

“Your majesty,” Tantagel says breathlessly as he lithely regains his feet. “How happy we are to see you returned. Though you lost many of your Elytra, I rejoice that you abandoned hope of recovering Avalon before you were lost as well.”

“You are mistaken, Lord Tantagel,” Isfin declares soberly at the reminder of her lost companions. “We have been successful.”

It is the first time I have seen Tantagel’s glossy manners fail him. His smile slips on one side, throwing off the perfect symmetry of his features in a vaguely disturbing way. I’ve always found that there’s nothing more off-putting than a beautiful face that is marred by ugly thoughts.

“We have reclaimed Avalon for Queen Isfin,” Fitspur says when no one else speaks. “And I shall end Asphodel’s reign of terror with this.”

He draws Calx so that all may see the darkly glittering sword.

All the assembled elves are duly impressed, even the ones who seem bent on hating him for being Unseely.

“*If* we can get you close enough to him to lay challenge, maybe,” Lady Pendaris says pessimistically, but there is a hopeful glimmer in her smile as she eyes Calx. She glances up at Yxis as if remembering her presence and frowns. “Do something about that phoenix.”

“She has no place to go. Asphodel is chasing her for helping us escape,” I say. I gesture to the soggy ground. “It’s not like she can burn anything here, anyway.”

Lady Pendaris eyes Lady Yxisis, and then gives in. “The phoenix will be given refuge in the Marsh for now, but she cannot stay permanently.”

Not like I want to stay, anyway.

Yxisis corkscrews her wings and lifts off with considerable effort. She really needs a place to lay her eggs. As I watch the phoenix fly into the interior of the Marsh, Tantagel steps in front of Fitspur and I to bar our way.

“How, exactly, did you retake Avalon?” he asks us, his face immobile and his lips tight with anger. He looks at me. “Did you strike a bargain with your master? Avalon for Isfin? Or was this Asphodel’s plan all along—to plant you by her side so you could hand us all over to him in the final battle?”

“Tantagel!” Isfin scolds.

“You have been seduced by this human,” he scolds in turn. “You think they are all like your dear friend Jonara was, but in truth, they are more like Asphodel. This human will betray you just as he did.”

Okay. I’ve had it with this asshole. “What is your problem, Tantagel?” I ask, getting in his face. The elves tighten ranks around their lord. Fitspur and Meomi respond in kind and move closer to me, their hands flexing toward their sword hilts.

“You are outsiders,” he hisses, looking between me and Fitspur.

“Only because you see us as such,” Fitspur replies, more than a little hurt by this bald fact.

“What loyalty can *you* have to the elves, Whumpson?” Tantagel retorts. “Even now ogres march with Asphodel against us, and ogres bearing banners from your own clan were among the Unseely who burned the Glen.”

Lady Pendaris jumps in before Fitspur can.

“As you would remind her majesty that Ramsay is not Jonara, I would remind you that Fitspur is not his brother Rickspur. Though ogres had a hand in burning our sacred groves, Fitspur fought for the elves in our dark hour—yay, and even killed three obsidian trolls while he was at it,” she rejoins scathingly. “It is your shame that speaks against these heroes, for

they succeeded in restoring Avalon to her majesty when you dared not even try.”

Tantagel’s face twists with insulted rage, but Isfin intervenes before more can be said.

“Peace!” she calls, stepping into the center with her arms extended to press our two factions apart. “We simply cannot afford to bicker amongst ourselves. Either put your grievances aside and ready yourselves for battle, or forsake your rank and title and quit this place immediately.”

That got everyone’s attention. After a stunned silence, Tantagel bends the knee before Isfin and for the first time since I have known him, he appears truly humble.

“The Sylvan elves are yours to command, my queen,” he says dutifully, as if he were a seasoned general, long accustomed to her command.

And maybe he is. How would I know otherwise? The only time I’ve ever seen him in a fight he was stinking drunk, ambushed, and carried away by his personal guard before he could even call for his sword. I don’t really know Tantagel or what he and Isfin have been through together. They may have fought many battles together, and all the tension I’ve witnessed between them could be due to the fact that he is a good general (though a bigot) who has proved to be a crappy peace-time leader. (Probably because he is a bigot.)

I hope that’s it, for all our sakes. I hope I misjudged him and that he is a good and loyal general who loves our queen. But I still feel a smidge of doubt about him because, though his show of devotion seems real, how could any man not bend the knee before her only to stand taller in her favor? She’s glorious, and we’re all like plants, stretching our hungry arms toward her light. That doesn’t mean that later he won’t try to stab her in the back.

“Rise, Lord Tantagel,” Isfin replies, satisfied that he has finally come to heel. “There is no time to waste. From which direction does Asphodel approach?”

“He comes from the west,” Tantagel reports crisply. He meets her eyes. “The setting sun will be behind him as he attacks.”

“It’s to be tonight then?” she asks. Tantagel nods solemnly in reply.

We all deflate at the prospect of meeting Asphodel’s army so soon and under such unfavorable conditions, though I should have expected it. My

former master did not outright train me in battlefield tactics, but he did often reference them as a way of teaching me about life in general. He told me there's a reason that predators are corpuscular. Having the setting or rising sun behind them in an attack means that they can see their prey clearly, but the prey can't see the predator who is swamped in light from behind. If you're going to go to war, put the light behind you, he said. I guess it wasn't just a nihilistic euphemism.

"Good," Isfin says unexpectedly. Her eyes flick to mine. "We are out of time. Take the Merlin and my champion to show them the field and inform them of your battle plan," Isfin orders.

"Yes, my queen," Tantagel replies as he turns away, already signaling to his soldiers with crisp hand movements.

"Go with them, Meomi," Lady Pendaris says. "I will tend to the Queen."

"Yes, mother," Meomi replies, and she quickly comes between Fitspur and I as we stride behind Lord Tantagel.

Fitspur glances back at the retreating figure of the queen.

"What is it?" I ask, sensing something is off with him.

Fitspur opens his mouth to reply, but his glance lands on Meomi between us and he thinks better of it.

"Nothing," he replies.

"Who knew *nothing* could make you so grouchy?" Meomi teases, after an appropriately long silence.

Fitspur's frown breaks into a smile. "I have plenty to be grouchy about, Mimi," he informs her.

"Like the fact that we're about to die?" I ask. "You know...again," I tack on.

"There has been a surprising amount of peril in our lives lately," Fitspur comments.

"And doom," Meomi adds.

"Can't forget the doom," I say sagely. "So, this is just, like, a normal Monday for us."

"Any run of the mill Monday," Meomi agrees. "Nothing to get grouchy about, really."

Fitspur's shoulders shake in silent laughter. "I hate you both so desperately."

“We hate you desperately, too, brother,” I reply, looking across at them. Meomi stares at Fitzpur’s profile longingly while he smiles thoughtfully at the ground.

We trot along for a bit, decidedly less attractive and much more travel-worn than the elegant elves that swoop around us. They are clad in shining armor or painstakingly wrought fighting leathers. We look like crap. We smell like crap. We’ve been through crap. It feels good.

Our party comes to a small rise and the mass of elves in front of us slows. Lord Tantagel takes the crest and then looks back over his soldiers until he sees me.

“Merlin,” he calls, gesturing for me to join him. I dart ahead of my companions and look down the rise at the valley below. An army of tens of thousands have amassed.

They are a motley and terrifying crew of trolls and ogres, wolf-beasts and hobgoblins, brownies, and...shit. I think I see a few leprechauns. Now, don’t get all sentimental about green beer and pots of gold. Leprechauns are evil bastards. Yet, even in this tumult of misshapen bodies, and their car crash assortment of ungainly weapons, there is some order to it all. They are divided up into battalions, and there are bannermen and mounted knights leading foot soldiers. This is no horde. This is an army.

I would be shaking in my boots right now at the sight of so many vicious creatures assembled against us, but for the fact that they all seem to be retreating.

“Where are they going?” Meomi asks as she and Fitzpur move up to stand on either side of me.

Tantagel is at a loss. “I have no idea,” he replies. He looks sharply at me. “Is this a spell? Have you made them lose their minds?”

I shrug and sputter, “I-I wish! There’s no spell I know of that would make an army turn away like this. Bloody great spell it would be, though.”

Tantagel begins to look about at his soldiers for an answer. “Was a message sent from Asphodel’s camp?” His eyes are searching and demanding, yet his elves answer him with blank stares. “A flag raised?” Still, no reply. He loses his temper. “Someone had better come forward and tell my why Asphodel’s army would suddenly turn tail without so much as a *fart* aimed in his direction!”

While I love that Tantagel said the word *fart*, I don't have the will to laugh right now. Something is desperately wrong, because I know that if Asphodel is retreating it means he already has what he wants. But there's only one thing he wants. And there's no way...

"Did he have any demands?" Fitspur asks, his breathing elevated and his eyes wide with fear. "When the army first approached, did Asphodel send before them a herald announcing his demands and his intentions if they were not met?"

"Of course," Tantagel replies, shrugging, because this is how war is done in Lucitopia. There are rules, otherwise it's just a brawl. "He demanded we give him the queen."

Tantagel speaks as if this was both expected and unthinkable, but Fitspur grows even more distressed, as do I. How could Asphodel have gotten to Isfin?

"Meomi," he says quietly, turning to her and drawing near. "Your mother..."

Fear sluices down my insides, chilling me to stillness. I know it as soon as he says it. Isfin told me it would happen. She said that betrayal was a part of this story we were in, though I never imagined this. But I guess that's the real bitch about betrayal. It makes you feel like such an ass for never expecting it, even when you're expecting it.

"My mother *what?*" Meomi asks, nonplussed.

"She knew about Rickspur. She's never met him, yet she knew which of my brothers attacked the Glen. The only way she could have known that is if she had been working with Asphodel," Fitspur says.

Meomi can't see it yet. I don't have time for this. I grab Fitspur's forearm and pull him to me. "Where would he take her?" I growl.

"I don't know," Fitspur growls back. "*You* know him best. *Think.*"

Meomi stops us and makes me face her. She looks lost and terrified and angry. Exactly like how I feel right now. "What are you talking about?" she demands.

"Your mother gave Isfin to Asphodel!" I yell at her, not because any of this is her fault, but because I have no one else to yell at. "That's why she told you to come with us and why his army leaves with no battle. He got what he wanted. He got Isfin."

I can't feel the ground under me, but I know I'm running.

I sense more than see Fitspur and Meomi running along beside me. I know that they can't be the only ones following me back to the Marsh at a dead sprint, but I'm incapable of seeing any farther than the immediate circle around my body, and I can't hear anything over the foghorn in my brain that is howling *Isfin*.

It's exactly like when I first laid eyes on her in Asphodel's dungeon. She crowded out the whole world, and all I was aware of was the klaxon of panic in my mind. Like the echo of my future self was preparing me for what was to come, some part of me knew then what I would feel when I eventually lost her. I can't tell if this is because of Isfin's time-traveling blood, or if it's just the author screwing with me. She loves to end her stories where they began, no matter how much she has to doctor the plot to do so.

Come to think of it though, right now I couldn't be happier about her little foible because I think it can tell me where to find Isfin.

I plunge into the Marsh, trying to follow the route that I believe Lady Yxis took by air into its center. Fitspur decides to start interrogating some of the Marsh elves who try to intercept us—and by interrogate, I mean punch in the face.

“Where is Lady Pendaris!” he roars, standing over the prone body of an elf he just demolished.

The elf spits blood to the side and glares up at Fitspur defiantly. “You know nothing of honor, Unseely. Queen Isfin went willingly. She said that there was no reason for so many to die in her stead, and she heroically went into Asphodel’s cursed portal because she knows that by her brave sacrifice she can...”

He doesn’t get a chance to finish because I kick him in the ribs. Okay, it’s a cheap shot, but he already pointed out that I know nothing of honor, and I really need to kick something. Also, he’s wrong.

“Leave him!” Lady Pendaris commands as she storms toward us.

I round on her. “How could you be so stupid?” I yell at her.

She looks taken aback by my question. Maybe she was expecting me to call her a traitor?

“Is it stupid to try to save your entire race?” she asks me in return. “The elves face annihilation, Merlin. I gave Isfin the choice to go with Asphodel, and she made the right one. Isfin would gladly die for her people.”

“How long have you been aligned with him, mother?” Meomi wails. “Was it before the burning of the Glade?”

Lady Pendaris waves an impatient hand in her daughter’s direction, but she can’t meet her eyes. “You three think that just because Isfin is queen, she is at peace with the idea that all of her subjects should die for her, when the opposite is true,” she says scathingly. “Isfin would die for any one of us. I merely gave her the chance to be the hero I know her to be.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose in an effort to keep the red blobs of rage from over taking my vision entirely before looking up at her again.

“If Isfin dies, you *all* die,” I say, enunciating every word so I never have to repeat them. “Fitspur pulled the sword from the stone and then *he gave Calx to Isfin*. Now she’s bound to Avalon—life for life, the Dagda said. If she dies, Avalon dies, and so will *all* of you.”

I see Lady Pendaris’ face melt into fear, but it gives me no pleasure to see her brought low. Not at this cost.

“But...no. The Dagda told me. Fitspur pulled the sword from the stone, so he is to be king. The king is bound to the land, as the Dagda was...” she tries, but I’ve already explained it to her. She just isn’t ready to accept it yet.

Fitspur regards Lady Pendaris, crushed. “How could you hand her over to him?”

“She agreed to go. Why would she do that?” she replies at a whisper. “She said I was *right* to betray her.”

Of course, Isfin let Lady Pendaris off the hook. She would never let anyone she loved to suffer, even if it meant she had to be the one to apologize for her own death.

“There’s no time for this,” I say, turning away and looking around. “Where the hell is Lady Yxisis?” I shout, but I don’t wait for a reply from my startled companions. I start blundering off into the squelchy, mossy, springy land of the Marsh.

I’m used to Lady Yxisis being the one to initiate our telepathic conversations, but I’m desperate, so I reach out to what I think might be her mind. It’s more like a wish or a prayer, really, but I just think really hard about Lady Yxisis while I go toward what I hope is her general direction.

I know you have no reason to do me any favors, as I owe you so many already, but I need your help.

After a moment, I can hear her in my head. *What is it, mage? I am very tired.*

“Why are you running with your eyes closed?” Fitspur asks. He’s running alongside me, steering me somewhat so I don’t fall flat on my face, I realize.

“I’m talking to Lady Yxisis. I’m about to beg her to take me to the Ebon Spire,” I reply as my feet slop down and kick up endless amount of muck.

“Why would you want to go there?” Meomi huffs as she runs along on the other side of me.

“That’s where Asphodel took Isfin,” I reply with more certainty than I feel.

“How do you know—” Meomi begins, but I cut her off because I can’t break down the structure of a *Lucitopia* novel for her right now. It started in the Ebon Spire and it’s going to end there. Pretty sure.

“I just do!” I shout back.

We come through a tuft of reeds and water lilies to a small hillock that rises from the general wetness and greenery of the Marsh. Atop this modest hill in the otherwise low-lying wetland lays Lady Yxisis, her damp wings spread wide in the fog-filtered sunlight. I think I see her shiver. That can’t be good.

Please, Lady Yxisis, carry me to the Ebon Spire, I cry out in my mind. Help me save Isfin!

I hear the phoenix sigh as she labors to raise onto her feet. *Oh, alright. But I'm not carrying the whole bloody elven army there.*

Instead of lifting off, hovering, and holding out a talon for me to climb into as has become our usual custom, Lady Yxisis parts her damp wings and cock a leg—I'm assuming so I can climb up on her back. As I am scrambling to do so, Fitspur and Meomi stop me.

"What about us?" Fitspur asks.

"You can't face Asphodel alone," Meomi agrees.

"I don't think Lady Yxisis can carry all three of us, not anymore," I say quietly so as not to offend her. "You'll have to follow as best you can." I scramble up onto Lady Yxisis. "And bring an army."

"I just so happen to have one," Meomi replies.

"Here. You'll need this," Fitspur says in a serious tone. He draws Calx from its sheath and holds the famed sword out to me, hilt first.

"I'm not pure enough for that. And besides, I've already got this lovely staff the Dagda gave me—" I say, hefting the miserable bit of firewood that I've oddly become quite attached to. I hardly even notice it's in my hand anymore, it's become such a part of me.

"You can't kill Asphodel without it," he says, pushing Calx's hilt into my free hand.

I don't get struck by lightning, or swallowed by the earth, or some other nonsense as I figured would be the punishment for an unrighteous bonehead such as myself trying to wield Calx. I guess I've been found worthy. No one is more shocked about that than me.

"We'll be right behind you, brother," Fitspur says.

I stare at the sword. "It should be you going to save her," I say to him, but he won't let me continue.

"It should be the man she loves," he replies knowingly.

"Yeah. You."

He shakes his head. "I asked for her hand in marriage the night we spent on Avalon. She told me she couldn't marry me because she's in love with you. Why do you think I nearly bit your head off that morning I, uh...found you with Mimi?" He pauses uncomfortably and glances at Meomi, his

cheeks heating up to a deeper emerald hue. I think he's blushing. She certainly is.

Way too much time passes.

"What is *wrong* with her?" I blurt out, dumbstruck. "I'm not good enough for her. I'm not good enough *to* her."

"About that," Meomi adds. "You'd better shape up, Ramsay. I think you're fantastic, but if you don't stop being mean to Isfin in this bogus attempt to push her away I'm going to have to kill you."

"That's what *I'm* saying," I agree. "No one should have to put up with me. I've been horrible."

"You'll do better," Fitspur says, shrugging. "Now go save her." While I'm staring at him with what is probably the stupidest look I've ever had on my face, he steps back so Lady Yxisis can take off. He grins at me. "And *tell* her that you love her."

He is adorable, Lady Yxisis purrs in my head.

Yes, I know.

I want to eat him.

She leaps into the air and beats the air with her wings.

Isfin loves me. That's the dumbest, craziest, most wonderful thing I've ever heard. But I can't focus on that, or the fact that my internal organs feel unaccountably buoyant, because I have to pay attention to every detail of the landscape swishing past below me in case I need to cast a *Portal* spell from the Ebon Spire to the Marsh. It's always good to have an exit strategy. Especially when you don't even have an entrance strategy.

Lucitopia looks like a map from the air—an actual map, like one you would see in a fantasy novel, so it is quite easy to picture. It is, after all, a picture. There are even little lines drawn on the ground between territories, and a handy rose compass off to the side. Super useful if you are trying to memorize every little bit of a particular path, as I am.

We circle an area conveniently labeled *The Dead Meadow* and Lady Yxisis begins her descent. As she does so, the quaint hand-drawn landscape becomes real again. I guess it has all become real to me, and because of that, it is terrifying to think I might fail. I've never read a *Lucitopia* story where the hero failed, but then again there are those Burn Files I've heard about. Maybe the failures simply don't get published.

I can't land below, and I can't alight on the tower, Lady Yxis tells me. There is something pushing me away from it.

It's a spell, I reply, though I'm sure she's figured that part out. I'll have to use magic to get myself in. Fly away from here as soon as I am gone. And—again—I am in your debt.

I hope these tattoos have a lot of juice in them. My exit strategy is about to become my entrance strategy. I raise my hand and cast a *Portal* spell. Shit, this is dangerous. I have no idea if Asphodel has set special spells to keep other sorcerers from *Portaling* in, but it's too late to consider that now. Well, at least I can picture my way into the Ebon Spire as specifically as the spell requires, as I walked out of it once. Celebrate the small things, they say. My tattoos writhe under my skin and the little bastard on the left bites me.

I appear in the great hall, the one with Asphodel's empty throne. Ice cracks off me as I take a step and start heaving air into my lungs. I'm so glad no one is here to see this because I am staggering around and clutching my chest in a very unheroic way.

"Dungeon," I say to my amulet when I've regained my ability to speak.

My amulet heats up and I run, trusting that I know how to be guided by the amulet well enough that I won't miss even the slightest change in temperature. That's what having to pee in the middle of the night with nothing but a hot and cold piece of jewelry to get you to the lavatory will do for you.

I run up many flights of stone stairs to get to the lowest level of the dungeon. The Ebon Spire can feel my dread. It will make me climb up a mountain of fear and self-doubt, and I will never get there if I keep giving in to this panic spiral. I level out my emotions and the ground I must cover levels out beneath me. Finally, I come to the iron door of the dungeon and burst through it.

In the back, in the same cell he put her in last time, are Isfin and Asphodel.

I've seen this gruesome sight before. She was dressed differently then, but her body lays on its side in the exact posture I remember, and the hole between her ribs leaks another dark pool of syrupy blood the color between rubies and onyx. Asphodel is down on all fours next to it, staring into the gory mirror of his past.

Echoing my rage, Calx bursts into flames in my hand. It does not burn my flesh, though it does burn off a fair bit of my clothes. I pull off my smoking tunic and stalk toward Asphodel in my more flame-retardant leather breaches.

Something breaks Asphodel's entranced gaze from the pool of Isfin's blood. Maybe it's the glare of Calx's flame refracting back into Asphodel's eyes, or maybe it's the heat of the flame burning him. Whatever it is, it's obvious he is well acquainted with Calx.

Asphodel's head snaps around and, still on all fours, he snarls at the flaming sword like a wolf.

"Ramsay," he hisses at me. And then he lunges.

Right next to him is his broadsword, and he swings it up at me in an impossibly fast arc. I jump back in time, but he's on his feet now and his broadsword comes back down at me. I bring Calx up one-handed, and barely manage to stop his blow just above my head. Beneath the cross of our blades, we glare at each other through our straining forearms. A feral glint lights his hazel eyes and he lifts a twitching lip over his incisor.

"So, the Dagda gave you nine lives, I see," he grunts, looking at the Ouroboros.

I laugh. "Think you can kill me ten times?" I ask because I know that's what he's thinking. I've been hiding my staff, and I bring it around now and crack him in the ribs.

He falls back, hurt, and stares at the staff. His eyes narrow at me in fear.

"And he gave you his staff. But you don't know how to use it, do you?" he says, suddenly relaxing. "If you did know, I'd be dead."

Wait. This is the *Dagda's* staff? The one that takes and gives life? Why doesn't anyone *explain* anything to me? I don't need five pages of exposition—that's bad writing—but this is purposeful obfuscation, don't you think?

Asphodel comes at me in a blur of steel. I only manage to block him because Calx is surprisingly light for such a big sword and the flame hides the edge of it, confusing an attacker. His barrage pushes me back and I nearly step on Isfin. I do an odd stutter step to avoid her.

"Poor Ramsay," Asphodel says, chuckling. He relaxes while I stumble. It isn't a kindness. He's giving me a moment to take in the fact that Isfin is dying beneath my feet. "I tried to teach you about magical beings," he

continues condescendingly. “I tried to warn you that they are beasts better kept as food for our magic, but you wouldn’t listen. Now it will cost you your heart. As it cost me mine once.”

His words are purposefully barbaric. He doesn’t believe them. There was a time when he loved a magical being as I love Isfin.

“Let me help her,” I plead. He lunges at me and I barely parry in time. I’m forced to step away from her and deal with him.

I come at him with Calx in the showiest way possible, fan-turning it like Luke Skywalker with his lightsaber to hide the real attack with the staff. I manage to get in a few good shots. I may have even cracked his ribs and broken a bone in his wrist, but I can’t kill him with the staff unless I land a lucky blow to the head, and Asphodel is too good to allow that. I’m losing. I’m losing because I’m losing her. As we fight, she dies, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

“If she dies, so does your past!” I yell at him in a frantic bid to save her.

His face darkens and he snarls at me in return, “If she dies, Avalon will die, magic will die, and hopefully, this world will die. I’ll finally have what I really want.”

“And what’s that? World domination?” I ask flippantly, though I am curious to know what this guy wants.

“No,” he replies quietly. He looks lost. “Just an end to it all.”

“That’s all you want. An end?” I ask. I hold up Calx. “I can kill you right now.”

He shakes his head tiredly. “That’s not a way out for me. It’s only the start of a new way for me to be evil. You know of what I speak, though you pretend you don’t.” His eyes burn. “How do I get out of here, Ramsay? How do I free myself? Tell me and I will give you Isfin.”

“I don’t know,” I answer. “I don’t know how to free you, apart from killing you. I’m sorry that you’re trapped here but you don’t need to do this.” I point down at the pool of blood. “Look into it. Find your past, and your answers. But let me save her.”

I plead with him as I’ve never pleaded for my own life or comfort. He has tortured me and taunted me, and never once did I beg for mercy. I’m begging now.

He shakes his head with genuine sadness. “She is not old enough to give me the parts of my past that I need. She was not there for my beginning.”

He looks down at the ground. At Isfin. At some thought skittering through the air that eludes him. “If I cannot find my beginning through her, at least she can end my interminable future. If she dies, so will the everlasting elves. I will kill all the other magical beings and drain this place of magic. And so, Lucitopia will end. That is the only peace for me. And you will not stop me from finding peace, Ramsay.”

This time, there is no amount of showmanship I can muster with Calx that can distract him. Our fight becomes brutal and desperate. He is struggling with the injury I’ve given him, but he is still the fastest opponent I’ve ever seen, and he cuts me across the chest and comes back around, nearly beheading me. I block his blow but lose my footing. I fall back and he eases forward, lithe as silk. He stands above me and strikes, and I don’t even think about my sword or my staff. Instead, I conjure.

I mean, really. How dare I come at the greatest sorcerer in all the land with magic? Even Asphodel is surprised. He hears the spell lipping off my lips and sees the spell wafting out of my hand, and he looks at me like—*seriously?*

I feel like I’m trying to dunk on Shaq. It’s not even a good spell. It works, but it’s lame. His sword is not thrown across the room with ringing authority, rather it slides off to the side with a *futting* sound. But it’s enough to distract him.

I kick him in the balls and conjure something better. A *Thunderclap* spell. I feel my Ouroboros writhe under my skin as I hurl the concussive wave of magic at Asphodel. He throws his hands up, shouting a *Shield* spell as he flies back into the wall of the dungeon. He hits it hard, but his spell kept him from being crushed.

As I stalk toward him, he scrabbles through the bloodstained rushes. He looks older. I’d say it cost him about twenty years to make that *Shield* spell.

“Let’s see who has more life, shall we?” I ask coldly. I glance at Isfin. I can’t tell if she’s breathing.

I want him to hurt. I conjure an *Agony* spell. He shrieks and writhes, falling to the ground, but he doesn’t waste his life force with a counter spell. He is a tough bastard.

“Remember when you cast that on me?” I ask him.

His screams turn into hysterical laughs as the *Agony* spell ebbs. “I do. And do you remember why I did it?”

“To teach me how to endure it,” I reply.

“I was lying.” He grins at me, looking horrific. “I just wanted to see you suffer.”

“Now you’re just being nasty.”

I conjure another *Thunderclap* but he scurries out of the way. My spell hits the back wall, shattering it. As the masonry tumbles, it reveals the Dead Meadow behind it. I guess the dungeon is on the ground level. Strange, but so is everything else about the Ebon Spire.

Through the hole I just made in the wall, I can see the sun is setting. It is the end of my last day in Lucitopia. I can hear the bellows of the living in the distance. The ground churns as the Dead Army starts rising in droves. The elves must be here to do battle with Fitzpur and Meomi leading them. They did get here fast.

Asphodel mumbles something, and I catch what it is just in time. It’s a *Fire* spell. Those don’t take much life force to generate, but he caught me out of position, and I must conjure a huge *Shield* to protect both myself and Isfin. Smart—but of course it’s smart. As I hold up my *Shield* I can see my Ouroboros tattoo fade to nothing. I have maybe one spell left in me before it kills me, and it has to be *Healing* for Isfin.

I push toward Asphodel, protected by my *Shield* until his *Fire* peters out, and then I rush him. He’s empty handed, and an old man after that last spell. All I have is my staff or I would kill him now. Instead, I crack him on the side of the head. He crumples to the ground, unconscious and hopefully dead, and I run to Isfin. I pick her up in my arms, holding her. I call her name. I can hear the battle on the Dead Meadow, but I can’t see it. All I can see is Isfin’s face. I can’t believe how precious it has become to me.

“Ramsay,” she whispers.

“I’m here,” I tell her. “Don’t move. I will heal you.”

Her eyes flutter open. “Where’s Asphodel?”

“He’s over there,” I reply waving in the general direction of his body.

“Is he dead?”

“I don’t know, now please be quiet. This is a complicated spell.”

She smiles at me and lets her head drop back into my arms.

Healing spells take a long time say. Remember what I told you about simple spells having a lot of safeguards? Well, there is no spell with more safeguards than a *Healing* spell, which makes sense when you think about

it. Last thing you want to do when you are magically sealing a puncture wound would be to accidentally seal off every hole in the injured person's body. It's important to be precise, both in regular medicine and in magical medicine. Magic and medicine have a lot in common. Odd that I'm just realizing that now. Anyway, this particular spell is chock full of safeguards and, therefore, longer than a Bible. I'm at the last three words of it when I feel a bolt of pain in my back.

I'm strangely exhilarated. I'm tingling all over. I look down. There's a sword point sticking out of my chest. It takes me a moment to process the fact that Asphodel has impaled me. That prick stabbed me in the back.

The sword point disappears into my chest with a streak of searing pain as he pulls it out. Oh well. At least I can finish the spell before I die. I say Isfin's name and bind the *Healing* spell to her. Blood gushes out of the chasm in my anatomy and pours over her. She screams. I know what's coming next—the death blow. Reflexes take over. I drop Isfin, grab Calx, and swing around to meet and block Asphodel's sword. I stagger to my feet, gripping Calx between my palms.

"You *stabbed* me in the *back*," I growl at Asphodel. He has the decency to look embarrassed.

"I am sorry about that, Ramsay, but I had to," he explains as he tries not to clutch too obviously at his broken ribs, or hunch too much over his broken arm. "I have other things to attend to. As you can see, the elves are advancing across the Dead Meadow."

"Good!" I shout back at him, fighting to see through what appears to be a gray curtain that is coming down in front of my eyes. Maybe that's why they say "it's curtains for you, kid" in those old black-and-white movies. "Fitspur will kill you when I'm dead," I slur.

"Even if he defeats the Dead Army, he'll never find me in the labyrinth of the Ebon Spire," he tells me with mock sadness as he drops his guard. He can see that I'm dying, and he no longer needs to defend himself so rigorously.

He glances over his shoulder at the hole in the wall behind him. Then he looks back at me in here, in this dungeon where I nearly died so many times. And where I found Isfin and Fitspur and everything else I care about. Isfin is trying to stand. She is healed, but it takes a moment to shift from nearly dead to normal again even with a spell. But she is getting stronger,

and soon I would even be able to take power from her to heal myself. Unfortunately, I am not going to last that long.

I hand her Calx as I crumple to the ground. She grips the pommel of the sword and looks at Asphodel, who is badly injured and enfeebled with old age after sacrificing so much life force to cast spells against me. Of the two of them, he's the worse off. She could take him right now. I know it. And so does he.

"Some other time, my lady," Asphodel says after weighing his chances against her. Clutching his broken ribs, he clammers out the hole in the dungeon wall.

I hear Calx clang to the ground. She didn't go after him. Why didn't she go after him?

"Ramsey," Isfin gasps, her face appearing over mine. She presses her hands against the wound in my chest. Her hair falls in a curtain around us, closing us in and giving me a private moment here, with her. She is the last thing I want to see. It's perfect, actually.

"Hi," I say breathlessly.

Shit. I think "hi" was my last word. I'm such a dink.

So, this isn't death.

It can't be death because I feel like I have to sneeze.

When I open my eyes to see Isfin standing over me, looking like a goddess as she wields the Dagda's staff over her head. Oh yeah. The staff that brings you back to life. I guess she knows how to work it. Makes sense because it was her dad's. Purple and blue wisps of smoke streak out from the gnarly old bit of firewood and wrap around her in a globe of power. Her face is alight with witch-fire that courses over her body in glowing fingers, and her hair whips about on eldritch winds. She is magnificent enough to wake the dead. Which is exactly what she's doing.

"You are alive, Ramsay," she informs me in a ringing voice. "Now get up!"

"Yes, my queen," I respond, quickly rising to my feet.

She bends down and picks up Calx. "That's better," she says, alternately gripping the hilt of the sword and the pommel of the staff in her hands. She's trying to calm herself, I realize.

She's shaking all over. I reach out and take her shoulders in my hands while she takes a few rapid breaths through her quivering lips. She's been crying. Her face is wet. Her chest is shuddering.

"It's okay," I murmur, dipping my head and brushing my lips across hers. I pull her against me. "We're okay. I'm okay."

Little kisses turn into deeper ones as we pull closer to each other. I can't help it. Her skin is cold, and I want to warm her.

Isfin pulls away from me—still shaking, but this time not with fear and grief, I’m glad to note. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips are red, her eyes are liquid, and overall, I feel like I’ve done a decent job of warming her, though I want a chance to do better.

She holds out Calx, pommel first, and meets my eyes. “Stab me,” she says.

“No *fucking* way,” I reply immediately.

“You have to!” she cries, pushing the sword at me. “Go back to the moment before you were stabbed. You made a choice in that moment. Now make the other one.”

“I will not!” I yell back at her. “You don’t know what you’re asking me.”

She takes a deep breath. “You must go back to the moment before the observer witnesses your choice and make the other one.”

I take her shoulders again and pull her close to me. “The choice I made was to heal you with the last bit of power I had in the Ouroboros. I chose to save your life,” I tell her.

Her lips part as she looks up at me. “Then choose to save your own.”

I shake my head.

Tears gather in her eyes and spill out the sides. “Let me die this time, Ramsay, so you can kill Asphodel. You have to do it *now*.” She gestures to the hole in the dungeon wall and the last few streaks of crimson sunlight coming through it. “You won’t get another chance before your time is up. If you don’t kill him by the end of the day, your life is forfeit, is it not?” she asks.

I nod.

“Your sacrifice would not save me for long, because if you don’t kill him, he’ll eventually kill every single one of us, including me.” She puts Calx in my hands and aims the tip of the blade at her stomach. “Go back. Do it again. And this time, kill Asphodel.”

Much better last words than mine.

I step toward her. With one hand I catch the back of her head to kiss her. With the other hand, I stab her.

Being timetorn is not the sort of thing you get used to. It sucks just as much when you’re expecting the nausea and the disorientation and the

pounding in your head as when you aren't. I do not recommend time travel under any circumstance.

I also do not recommend killing the one you love. Though I am essentially killing Isfin to save her, it doesn't make it any easier.

I am kneeling in front of Isfin's bleeding, dying body three times over. There is the present me, who has just stabbed her, and there are the past mes which have now turned into two. She's taken me back to the moment just before I started saying her *Healing* spell. The last spell I have in the Ouroboros.

Because I've done this time travel baloney before, I know that out of the three of me, it's the past mes I have to focus on. Rather than heal Isfin, I must save myself. It's good that I know this because at this exact moment in the present Fitzpur, Meomi, and Lord Tantagel are calling out to me and fighting their way toward us through what is left of the Dead Army.

What did Isfin and the Dagda say about observers? If the *other* choice in the fifty-fifty chance scenario isn't made before the observer observes the choice, the chain of causality is broken, and the universe falls apart? Yeah. I think that was it. Well, Asphodel isn't the observer like he was in the dungeon. Everyone else is. Mother pussbuckets.

So, I'm on my knees.

And I'm on my knees.

And I'm on my knees—and I do not say the spell to heal her. Instead, I cast a *Shield* spell across my back.

I'm still on my knees and my friends are fighting for their lives. The sun sets and everything is suddenly on fire. I see Lady Yxis has joined the battle.

I'm still on my knees and Asphodel's broadsword goes through me.

I'm still on my knees and Asphodel's broadsword *twangs* off me and he stumbles to the side. This is the me I need to focus on. This me puts down Isfin and somehow works out the complicated mechanism for standing and facing Asphodel, all while two other sets of arms and legs are still kneeling. My head swims with multiple perspectives and two too many horizons. I think I'm going to barf.

"No—you were healing her. You did not cast a *Shield*," Asphodel says, confused. He's old. He's bleeding from the head. He's got broken ribs and a broken wrist. And I still think he can take me right now.

Oh look, I've got the Dagda's staff in my hand. Funny how I never remember that thing even when I'm holding it.

I'm still on my knees and I hear Fitzpur scream Isfin's name. Very distracting.

"I'm doing the other..." the past me slurs. Then I take a swipe at Asphodel. Shit. I missed him.

"What's wrong with you?" Asphodel asks. His eyes skitter around, looking for the cause of my sudden ailment.

"Hold still," I tell him.

I take another swipe and fall over. Oh, look at that. I fell over Calx. That's lucky because I can't kill him with the Dagda's staff. I heave, and I nearly throw up on the mythical sword, but I manage to pull it together and get Calx up in the air to stop Asphodel's downstroke.

I'm on my knees and Isfin is dying in my arms while my friends try to get to us. Everything is burning. They are still fighting through the Dead Army. Why are they yelling so much?

I'm fighting Asphodel even though I've been impaled and I'm dying. Why are we talking so much?

I'm standing in front of Asphodel with Calx in my hands. The sword bursts into flames, like it knows where it wants to go. Neither of us make a sound. A-ha. This is the me I need to be.

I step forward and drive Calx through Asphodel's heart. He looks at me like he's been betrayed.

"I don't want to be the evil sorcerer anymore. You must get me out, Ramsay," he begs.

"I—I don't know how," I stammer. Wait. Didn't the Lady of the Lake say something about this? "There's supposed to be a book—"

"What book?" Asphodel says, pleading with his eyes. "Is it a spell book? Tell me!"

"I don't know. If you destroy the book, it's supposed to destroy you once and for all. If you can call that freedom, I guess this is the only way. Destroying this book that was never a book is what ends you. I don't know anything else. I'm sorry. I really am." It's true. I've never felt so much pity for anyone. Not even myself.

"Find the book, Ramsey," he whispers. "I'm not supposed to be evil." And then he falls to the ground, dead.

I feel terrible for him, but I can't exactly mourn him. Besides, Calx is sticking up out of him at an odd angle and it just looks weird. Luckily, that reminds me Calx is supposed to be sticking out of Isfin in the present time. That means I have one more task to complete or the universe could implode.

I pull the blade out of Asphodel and go to where present me is kneeling with Isfin. I don't know if I make it there. I've noticed that being timetorn is worse when your body overlaps itself. I throw up on my way back to me, and then there's nothing.

I am alive and I am dead. Both states are true. I am Schrödinger's cat, and I'm waiting for the observer to open the box.

"Hit him harder," Fitzpur says. "He can take it."

"No, don't hit me harder," I moan. Then I barf.

"He's conscious. That's something," Meomi says optimistically.

Mage, I think it's time you woke up.

That was in my head. *Lady Yxis?*

"He's severely timetorn, your majesty," says Tantagel...I think it's Tantagel, anyway.

"Yes. Timetorn in two, actually," Isfin admits sheepishly.

"In two?" Tantagel stresses. "Where is his other self?"

"Ah...dead, I think," Isfin answers.

"Then where is the corpse?" Tantagel presses.

"It disappeared exactly at sun set. I believe it went back to his land in fulfillment of a magical contract he had undertaken. Which is probably uncomfortable for him," Isfin says. "To be both dead and alive."

I am the cat in the box.

I open my eyes and try to pin down the swimming images. Lady Yxis clings to the broken wall of the prison, peering at me curiously. Beneath her glowing body, my friends are hovering over me with worried looks on their faces. Isfin is bloody and pale, but she appears to be recovering from the wound I gave her.

"Isfin," I say, reaching for her. Bad idea. Another wave of nausea hits me, and I moan again. And barf again.

“If he keeps throwing up like that, this version of him will become a corpse too,” Meomi says.

“He’ll be fine,” Fitspur grouses. “Tantagel, hand me the rest of that elixir you used to heal her majesty.”

I feel myself getting lifted up and then fluid washes into my mouth. It is sweet and cool. I feel a bit better, but the world still spins every time I open my eyes so I’m keeping them shut.

“See?” Fitspur says. I feel myself being laid back down. “He’s practically better already.”

“He is not practically better,” Meomi argues.

“Give me the Dagda’s staff. Maybe we need to hit him again.”

Several voices say no at once.

“Hitting him again will kill him,” Isfin says. “We just have to wait for him to get better in his own time.”

A long silence ensues.

“I hate waiting,” Fitspur says.

It is daytime when I wake.

I do not feel dead. Not even by half.

I open my eyes to see two strangers by my bedside. Wait—not strangers. I’ve seen them before, though I am more familiar with their clothes.

“Michelander,” I say to the handsome man wearing the smart cravat. Then I look at the pretty woman in gray. “Valerie.”

I sit up in my bed—and it is my bed in the Ebon Spire, the same one I slept in for nearly a year—and they move to stop me.

“Young master, do not rush—” Michelander begins.

“Is he awake?” Isfin says from my study. I peer past Michelander and Valerie to see her rise from my desk. She’s taken over in there, apparently.

“I am,” I call out to her.

“You should eat first,” Valerie says. So strange to hear her voice.

“I’m feeling fine, actually,” I say waving her off. “I am glad to see you restored to yourselves,” I continue, including Michelander.

“The spell lifted as soon as Asphodel was dead,” Michelander tells me, though I guessed as much. “Many things are different here at the Ebon Spire, and as it now belongs to you through right of conquest, there is much to be discussed as to how you want it run.”

“Ebon Spire mine. Great,” I mumble, watching Isfin cross the room to me. She meets my eyes and smiles.

“There appears to be a phoenix guarding a clutch of eggs in the dungeon,” Valerie says, wringing her hands. “It’s getting quite smokey down there.”

It’s getting quite smokey in my bed, as well.

“Lady Yxis is my guest,” I say with finality. “She and her brood are welcome here for as long as they desire.”

“As you wish, lord Merlin,” Michelander says with a bow.

“Could you go to the kitchens and find suitable food and drink for the Merlin?” Isfin asks them politely. “I will watch him while you’re gone.” Yup. Everyone else needs to get out of my room immediately.

Valerie drops a curtsy. “Yes, your majesty.” She takes Michelander’s hand and brings him with her to the door.

“Don’t hurry back,” I tell them. The couple smile at me and leave.

Isfin sits on the edge of my bed. “They don’t remember much,” she says. “They barely remember me, but why should they? It was lifetimes ago for them.”

“U-huh,” I mumble, taking Isfin’s hand. I wrap my fingers around her slender wrist. She’s shaking.

“I don’t know how it works, but they come back with Asphodel after every Blank Period with no memory, just like him,” she says quickly. I bring her wrist to my mouth and brush my lips across it. “Somehow, they are tied up in the cycle of it, just as he is... what are you doing?”

I pull her closer to me.

“Aren’t you...sick? Or dizzy?”

“Uh-huh,” I reply, placing her hands on my bare chest. I lean forward and nuzzle the base of her throat. “I’m also very glad to see that you are neither.”

She gives a shaky laugh. “I wouldn’t say neither. Right now, I feel a bit dizzy.” She pushes me away. “Are you completely naked under there?”

I peek under the silk bedding. “Yup,” I reply.

She's blushing. A lot. Too much. It's like she's never seen a naked man before. Which leads me to my next question.

"That night. In the Dagda's cave. We didn't...did we?" I think I already know the answer.

She drops her flushed face. "Of course not." She looks up at me. "My *father* was there. And even though he's the orgy type and he's always telling me I should partake in one, I am not that type. In fact, I've never even..." she trails off.

"Oh."

"When you assumed that *we* had, and then, that I had with *Asphodel*," she grimaces. "I've never been so insulted."

"Oh, god," I groan, running a hand over my face. "I'm so sorry. I'd just assumed since you had lived for so long..."

"That what?" she demands. "Go on."

Why am I so naked right now? I try to cover at least the lower part of my abs with the sheet. "It's not that you should have, or you shouldn't have—that choice is entirely yours. But...well, why haven't you?"

"I've never wanted to," she replies, shrugging. "Probably because I've never been in love before now."

"Me neither," I say. Then I grin at her. "Are you saying you're in love with me?" Her eyes narrow like I'm pushing it, but before she can get angry, I take her hands in mine and say, "Because I am *definitely* in love with you."

She softens and leans closer to me. "It's complicated," she says, and I suddenly feel panicky.

"What do you mean, it's complicated? You don't love me?"

"No. But I can't marry you or my father will never wake," she says, her eyes wide and pleading. "The Dagda must *always* be king, and as queen, I can never marry and unseat him or he will die."

I sigh with relief. "Is that it? You can't marry me?"

She still looks tense. "Well, isn't that enough? I can make you my Consort, and you're already my Merlin," she stresses. "Yet, you can never be king. I do not wish to dishonor you. And if you cannot be with me because I won't make an honest man of you, I understand."

I let the sheet fall. "You're worried about dishonoring me?" I ask.

She modestly looks away from the swath of manliness I've laid out, buffet style, in front of her. Did I mention that I've gotten hella jacked since I came to Lucitopia?

"I don't want to take advantage of you, Ramsay." She frowns and bites her lower lip between her sharp, white teeth. She is adorable.

I lean back against the pillows, taking her with me. "You have my permission to take advantage of me in any way your majesty sees fit," I say.

Her eyes narrow and her lips soften. She fans her hands out across my chest as she shifts her weight over me.

"Careful," she warns. "Though orgies are not to my taste, I am still the Dagda's daughter."

Oh, this is going to be fun.

The procession to lay the Dagda to rest on the Isle of Avalon snakes for what seems like miles behind us.

Fitspur looks quite regal in his finest Whump garb—which from what I can tell is mostly bright green ogre skin, barely covered by a collection of high-quality leather straps, shiny spikes, and about a dozen different sheathes holding just about every kind of weapon you can imagine. His father's ax is secured across his back, and Calx he wears proudly on his hip as Her Majesty's Champion. Lady Meomi is dazzling in a red gown and rubies. She took her mother's place as the Lady of the Marsh when Pendaris voluntarily retired to some undisclosed pocket of Lucitopia. Fitspur and Meomi try not to walk side-by-side as tension between the Seely and the Unseely is not exactly gone, but it's impossible for them to stray too far from each other. I give them a month on the outside before they're sleeping together.

Lord Tantagel is looking perfect and douchy in light blue, though he really is a decent guy. He's just got one of those faces. I'm wearing the plain black of the Merlin, as Asphodel has vacated that color, but since I am also Consort to the Queen, I get to wear a thick gold chain about my shoulders. It weighs a ton, but it makes me feel like a rapper. Oh, and of course I carry the Dagda's ugly-ass staff. Even when I try to leave it behind, I end up finding it in my hand somehow. It's un-loseable. Wish I knew how

to work it. Well, eventually maybe I will. I have all of Asphodel's best scrolls to go through yet, and apparently as long a life as I can imagine as my Ouroboros tattoos returned. I'm still on the fence about the little bastard on the left, but the guy on the right is okay. At least he keeps his fangs to himself.

Isfin is unadorned, her hair is unbound, and she wears a simple slip of white silk in mourning. I'm trying hard not to see through it, but I can *almost* see through it so I'm making the rest up in my head out of memory, which is a bigger turn-on than if she'd just shown up naked. God, I hope this is a quick ceremony.

At the front of the procession is the Dagda, laid out on a crystalline slab looking like the dirty, hairy, blue woad-painted savage he was. Is. Not sure what tense to use with him because he's not exactly dead, he's just sleeping. The distinction doesn't really matter though, because Isfin has been crying for him as if he were dead since he went to his rest three days ago. It absolutely guts me, but I am not afraid of her sorrow the way I was for my mother's. Isfin's mourning is a sign that she is healing, not the start of an ever-downward spiral. I see the difference now, and in a way, seeing her healthy sadness has allowed me to mourn for both my parents as well. I never really had a chance to do that before.

We come to the edge of the lake and the crystalline slab that floats at the front of our procession comes to a stop. The Lady of the Lake rises from the water, very much not murdered by the other sirens, and comes to stand on one side of him. Isfin stands on the other side and looks down at her father.

"Goodbye," she whispers, and then she kisses him on the forehead.

She looks back at me. I step forward and take her hand. I raise my other hand and cast a *Sealing* spell around him. The little bastard on my left wrist gives me a nibble, but I look at him and he stops before his teeth sink in. Isfin has given me all the power I need for this spell and he's just being a dick.

The Lady of the Lake bows her head and leads the slab back out into the water of the lake. Rather than sinking beneath the surface, she walks across the top of it. The Dagda's sleeping body hovers above the waves, attended by the Lady of the Lake until he awakes. We watch until they both disappear in the mists. Just like the movie *Excalibur*, actually.

“Sleep well, Once and Future King,” Fitspur calls out. The phrase is chanted back by all present. Isfin comes to me and I put my arms around her. There is a moment of silence while the sun lowers beneath the horizon, and then the torches are lit.

“Let’s throw a party that would make the Dagda proud,” Isfin says. Fitspur, Meomi, and I grin at each other.

Oh yeah. It’s on. This party will last for weeks.



EPILOGUE

I 'm not supposed to be here. That's something I've always known. Whatever it is I am now, it's not what I was meant to be.

There's always been a voice in my head telling me that I was supposed to be more than just Asphodel the Evil Sorcerer, and as I float through yet another Blank Zone, wondering how much I'll forget this time when I finally emerge again fully formed, I search for that voice. If I can hold onto it, maybe this time I'll have a little more say in who I am when I come out of this nothingness.

I wish I knew my past. I wish I understood the anger I feel. The loss. The baseless disregard for other people's lives. The driving need I have to participate in witty banter when I'm dueling.

That never made sense to me. How many times have I been inches away from achieving my goal, and all I have to do is stop talking and focus on the fight and I could win it, but I don't? I go from calm to irrational, even though every fiber of my being is telling me to shut up and make a quick kill, yet I pick that particular moment to unburden my soul. It's pointless, but I can't seem to stop myself. It's like I'm compelled to make bad, borderline laughable decisions by some force outside of me. A force that has no common sense.

But none of this ever made any sense to me. I hate everyone, yet I relate so easily to others. I have this driving obsession with destroying the world, but I get attached to my enemies after one conversation. It's like I can't

quite figure out which side I'm on. I could either fall in love or burn the world, and I always pick the latter for no reason.

I sit in this nothingness and try to hold onto myself. I try to maintain a sense of self even though I can feel it slipping away. There's not enough there to hold me together.

And then I see her.

She's just a wisp, like me. A smudge of ink. Thinner than a thought, she's more like a feeling. A glimpse across a room. More ink is spilled and she starts to take shape. I notice her shape matches mine, but inside out in certain places. She's a bad guy with a good heart. She doesn't take very much seriously, while everything is life and death to me. She's never had her heart broken, and I don't think I've ever had a whole one. She's a thief—no. An assassin, but she only kills villains.

Well, I'm a villain, and because of that I know she'll come to kill me. Or try to.

I'm looking forward to it.



THE GREEN KNIGHT

Book four, and the final book in THE CHRONICLES OF LUCITOPIA series, is slated to be released in October 2023.

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