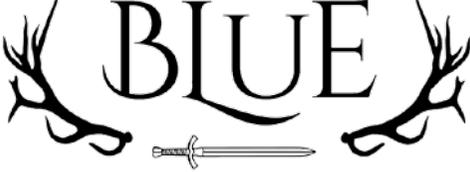


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LAVA RED
FEATHER
BLUE

The title 'BLUE' is flanked by two sets of antlers. Below the antlers is a dagger with a cross-guard.

MOLLY RINGLE

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FOR EVERYONE WHO NEEDS A
MAGICAL ISLAND TO ESCAPE TO.

LAVA RED FEATHER BLUE

CHAPTER I

DASDEMİR, EİDOLONIA - 1799

LARKIN STOOD IN THE PLAZA, FACING THE mist-cloaked hills to the northeast. There the fae realm lay, and from there Ula Kana and her forces would come. Larkin's parents, the queen and king, stood at either side of him. They wore bows over their shoulders, and quivers of iron-tipped arrows, as did Larkin. Three weeks ago, Ula Kana had destroyed a quarter of the city's buildings, including portions of the palace, killing hundreds of people before being driven off. She had been attacking at random for months, but that day had wreaked the most devastation by far. The fires had been put out, and the lava had cooled and hardened, but Larkin could still smell the smoke.

The citizens had dreaded her inevitable return since. Time behaved differently in the fae realm; perhaps for Ula Kana, the upheaval of Dasdemir had been only yesterday. Regardless, the government did not wish to wait any longer and had instructed the Court Sorcerer's League to enact a charm to summon her. It was time to end this. Not that Larkin truly believed they could.

He did not wish to be here at all. Had he been free to choose, he would have been on a ship far from Eidolonia, grieving to the indifferent ocean, letting the salt wind scour the dying screams from his ears.

But he was not free. He had been trapped.

The queen at times took his hand and squeezed it, and though he squeezed back, he was unable to tell her his wishes. The words raged within him, but would not emerge. Magic stayed locked implacably around his voice and his actions, so skillfully woven that not even his mother knew of the spell upon him.

A hundred and fifty of the country's best soldiers from the palace and

city guard stood in square formation around the royal family and the prime minister, with muskets, bows, and crossbows ready, wool cloaks about their shoulders in the December chill. The island of Eidolonia was of a latitude with Japan, in the middle of the Pacific, and rarely froze, at least not here at sea level, but cold gray days were common in winter. Or perhaps the biting wind stinging their faces was sent by malicious air fae. One never knew.

Fae stood among them too—the ones they could trust, their allies in the cause for peace. Cynics said it was no more than twenty percent of the island's fae population who felt kindly enough toward humans to live among them in cooperation. Optimists said it was at least half. No one could take a precise census, the fae realm being the labyrinth of enchantments that it was, but Larkin had begun to believe the majority of the fae were either indifferent or outright hostile. Ula Kana was demonstrably the latter.

Just a year earlier, she had regenerated from some past form, born into this new and particularly lethal one, and begun striking out against what she viewed as disgusting incursions by humankind onto an island that should belong only to fae. Larkin's fellow humans had only made everything worse by their retaliation, holding onto territory by staking it out with iron and spells, without attempting adequate deals with the fae first. Horrors redoubled by the week. Finally the country had reached this dreadful day, where he stood upon the cold stones of the plaza, his lover and so many others dead, his tongue locked.

Yet it was not Ula Kana nor any other faery who had lain this spell upon him.

He glanced over his shoulder at his older sister, the crown princess, who gave him a tremulous smile, tears in her eyes. *I would never choose this, how do you not suspect?* he wanted to shout at her. But all he could do was reassure her with a nod.

His family was weary of him, he reminded himself; they were tired of his protests against governmental officials and witches. Unseemly for anyone of the royal family to display strong opinions, they had told him time and again. To have him turn self-sacrificial instead was likely a blessing in their eyes. They would be sad, but relieved.

He turned to his other sister—twenty years old, six years his junior. She

wore fine-linked iron mail and held a bow, and stood among the royal guard, in their uniform, quite against the wishes of their parents. She was stubborn, brave, and merry, though today she stood with grim expression and stiff spine, her elaborate black braid down her back.

His sisters did not know of his spell either. Only one person did.

Witches waited alongside the soldiers, sashes of green, red, or yellow across their chests. Tallest and stoutest among them was the court sorcerer, Rosamund Highvalley, the only one wearing all three colors. She glanced his way and gave him a deep nod, as if silently repeating all the unreliable promises she had given him two nights ago.

Shouts arose. Over the hills, black dots and glimmers of fire grew in the sky. Ula Kana was coming.

The captain and Rosamund barked orders. The soldiers and royal family lifted their weapons. Larkin nocked his crossbow—that, at least, he would have chosen to do even if he were not being compelled. No need for yet more innocents to die. Some of the witches raised charms they had made. Larkin felt the tingle of their preparatory magic even from five paces away.

In a streak as fast as light, the fae shot across the land and loomed overhead, a dozen or more, close enough that Larkin could look straight into the ember eyes glowing in Ula Kana's ash-white face—the form of a woman melded to a nightmare. Smoke trailed from her lips, and her voice carried the hiss-crackle of a bonfire.

“How brave you’ve become. Do you summon me to tell me you surrender and will leave the island today?”

Yes, Larkin would have answered, if that is what it takes for us to live, then let us, by all means.

“We do not,” the queen responded. “We summon you to give *you* one last chance to surrender; to cease hostilities and return to the fae realm, never again to harm a human. Withdraw your forces now, or you will be imprisoned.”

Ula Kana did not deign to answer. She merely threw a lightning bolt at the royal family.

Larkin's ears rang with the blast, though no harm came to him—magic swathed him and his family, a protection flung on by the witches. The bolt

threw soldiers across the pavement, tumbling like stones. His younger sister and the other guards scrambled up again and launched their counter-attack.

They would never succeed. Were it possible to catch and immobilize Ula Kana, someone would have done so already. Yet only the fae could have managed it, in cooperation perhaps with human witches, and never until this recent agreement had they consented to try.

Howls reverberated off the broken walls. Iron-tipped arrows flew among fireballs and debris. Larkin got off a few shots, hitting at least one harpy-goblin and sending her spiraling away, then smoke and lightning obscured his vision so that he could not see what became of the rest of his arrows.

It mattered little. The fae could not be killed. Using iron to cause them temporary pain was the best anyone could do. Pursuing force rather than diplomacy was thus more than reckless: it invited doom.

The ground shook. Paving stones tilted under his feet; one of the remaining palace walls collapsed behind him in a rumbling crash, and he prayed for the safety of his niece and nephew, waiting inside under guard.

Then the thunder ceased and people's shouts became more orderly, even excited. Someone released the magical shield and blew away the smoke. Larkin felt dizzy in the aftermath of spells and fear. He lowered his crossbow.

Some of Ula Kana's allies had fled, while others lingered stunned on the edges of the crowd, held in arrest by witches and soldiers. Several humans lay wounded or dead, but none of his family. One of the dead he recognized as a close friend of Boris, Larkin's lover, who had been killed in the attacks three weeks prior. Larkin felt a pang for this friend's death, an echo of the wrenching grief he had been suffering for Boris. Then it eased to a dull gratitude: perhaps now Boris would have the fellow to keep him company, wherever his soul had departed to. Soldiers gathered to lift the man's body, and Larkin turned away.

Arlanuk strode forward through a parting in the crowd. He was a hunter, an earth faery, tall, broad-shouldered, and wood-armored, with vast antlers atop his head. He ruled one of the many fae territories and, under the terms of the deal with the government, had come to the human realm to help stop Ula Kana.

Ula Kana lay unconscious in his arms. She looked smaller than before.

The fae did shift often in size and form, and her conquerors' magic may have shrunk her; but besides that, the tendrils of lava that had served as her legs had disappeared, cooled to ashy gray shreds. At least six iron blades and arrows pierced her torso—Arlanuk avoided touching them as he carried her. She would have wrenched them out in fury if awake, but fae magic held her in slumber.

“Our half of the deal is fulfilled,” Arlanuk told the king and queen. “It is time to fulfill yours, or we release her.”

“It was admirably done, friend.” The queen’s voice quivered. “Might we have until sundown?”

Arlanuk’s eyes, like those of a mountain cat, grew sterner, the vertical pupils widening to dark.

“We shall do it now,” Larkin said. “I am ready.”

While it sickened him to hear his own voice speak against his wishes, worse still was that a small part of him did agree. If they had accomplished the seemingly impossible and stopped Ula Kana, perhaps someone *should* consent to the other half of the agreement. He did not want it to be himself. But who would he choose in his place? He could not condemn even Rosamund to a sleep likely to last years, possibly forever; and besides, the fae insisted upon it being one of the royals. Larkin had wished for, argued for, a different solution altogether, to revert lands to the fae as they had requested, but everyone else had been too consumed with greed and had not listened.

His body continued acting at Rosamund’s command. He took his mother’s arm, accepted his father’s kiss upon his forehead, and turned to face the palace. A portion of the north tower had collapsed, but it appeared the rest did still stand after all. He glanced back to ensure his younger sister was coming. She began to follow, but paused when Arlanuk addressed her.

“A fine shot, young mortal.” He nodded to the arrow sunk in the middle of Ula Kana’s chest.

She lifted her chin. “Thank you, friend. It would have been in vain had it not been for the valiant actions of your folk.”

He and she shared a curious gaze before she turned and followed Larkin.

Arlanuk stayed in the plaza with the rest of the fae, witches, soldiers, and government officials, guarding the sleeping Ula Kana. At the high arched

door of the palace, Larkin paused to look back at them. He lifted his hand in grave farewell.

Everyone, fae and human alike, knelt and bowed their heads. It moved him—a sign of harmony again at last.

He entered the palace with his family. They handed their weapons and armor to attendants, who bowed to Larkin and murmured prayers. Out in the plaza, someone began playing a melancholy tune on a wood flute, one of the songs composed by the earliest human settlers, almost a century ago, to honor the mysterious island. Voices joined in, people picking up the tune. Larkin could still hear the singing even as he and his family walked down the stone hallway to the prepared courtyard.

Only the eight of them entered the bower: the priest and priestess of the Temple of Eidolonia, Larkin and his parents and sisters, and Rosamund Highvalley. Four armed guards stood outside the door. It was a quiet space in the heart of the palace, with flowering vines growing up the walls, and colored mosaic floors creating a picture of turquoise ocean waves and snow-topped mountains. It had been open to the sky until the day before, when a roof had been hastily constructed, strengthened with Rosamund's magic, and fitted with a glass seven-sided window to let in the light.

In the center of the space stood another new feature: a stone bier four feet high, draped with the country's flag in silk, its reds and blues brilliant.

The priest fastened a baldric around Larkin, bearing an iron sword, its scabbard glittering with jewels. The priestess removed Larkin's cloak and replaced it with a lighter cape embroidered with the royal coat-of-arms, its hem cut into fluttering tatters in the traditional style. Then priest and priestess each took one of Larkin's hands and began chanting to the Lord, Lady, Spirit, and the four elements to grant peace to the suffering island, and to heap blessings upon the prince in his noble self-sacrifice.

Larkin's parents were weeping. His sisters, teary-eyed, embraced them.

Larkin looked at Rosamund, who was looking back at him, eyes lifted while her chin was lowered in prayer.

The prayer ended and his hands were freed.

Rosamund stepped up to the royal family. "Remember," she said. "This shall not be forever."

“It cannot be,” insisted the king.

“We’ll find another way to confine Ula Kana,” the crown princess said. “Negotiating with the fae—there has to be a solution.”

“This is the solution,” said Larkin, against his will. “This will bring peace, to me as well as to everyone. Perhaps I shall meet Boris again, in the world of dreams.”

Emotion strained their faces further, and he hated Rosamund with a new depth of passion. How *dare* she presume to put words in Larkin’s mouth regarding Boris?

Rosamund bowed. “Such things have been said to be possible in dreams, Your Highness. We will endeavor to make your sleep as sweet as it can be.”

He would gladly have killed her.

His family embraced him, murmuring how much they admired him. He wanted to rage at them to stop being idiots and recognize what was happening.

Yet all he could do was obey. He lay upon the flag-draped bier on his back, in his ceremonial finery. His family wiped away tears. The priest and priestess chanted prayers.

Rosamund placed her hands on the sides of his head.

He locked gazes with her. Fury blazed within his heart.

“You are saving the island, friend,” she said. “All will honor you through the ages. And I shall not give up in trying to free you.”

So said she who had imprisoned him in the first place and who did not allow his tongue to answer.

Then her magic swept in, a wave of lightheadedness that turned to a floating sensation, and his consciousness gave way to dreams.



SEVINEE, EIDOLONIA- 2020

Merrick Highvalley adjusted the wig on his head and shook the long red hair down his back, making Sal and Elemi laugh. “Wait—here.” He turned to the age-spotted mirror beside the window, took a deep breath to gather his magic from the air, and morphed his face: groomed eyebrows, a shapelier

mouth, the famous beauty mark beside it. He turned to Sal and Elemi and struck what he vaguely assumed was an eighteenth-century courtly pose, arms spread and one foot forward. “Prince Larkin in the flesh?”

“Yes!” Lying on the floor, his ten-year-old niece, Elemi, snapped photos of him on her phone. “Except you still need a costume. He wouldn’t wear that.”

“You don’t think?” Merrick glanced at his jeans and lavender button-down shirt.

“Also the hair is much too red,” his friend Sal said. “His is russet, not tomato.”

“I can’t remember.” Merrick rubbed some of the fake hair between his fingers. “It’s been years since I’ve done the tourist thing and been to Larkin’s Bower.”

“I’ve heard his hair and clothes aren’t as bright as they used to be,” Elemi said. “Because he’s been lying there so long. They would fix it, but the room’s all sealed up and no one’s allowed in to change anything because they don’t want to mess with the spell.”

“Oh, he’s preserved,” Sal said. “Hair included. That spell’s got fae magic backing it up; it’s good and strong. His clothes might’ve faded, though. Rosamund Highvalley and the fae probably didn’t give much thought to keeping dyes looking fresh, what with everything else going on at the time.”

“See what you can do, then,” Merrick said to Elemi, and waved toward the wig. “Darker red.” He was an endo-witch—one who could magically alter himself, but not anything or anyone else. Elemi, however, was a matter-witch, someone who could alter non-living material.

That said, she wasn’t a very experienced one yet. She got up and took hold of the wig, frowning in concentration. A burst of magic cascaded over Merrick, like being splashed with a glass of invisible water, and the wig turned orange. Elemi sighed and let go. “Lord and Lady!” she complained.

Merrick laughed. “No worries. We’ll have Cassidy do it.”

“Yes, because all your festival costume needs have to be done by me,” his older sibling, Cassidy, called from the adjacent room, a former bedroom that now served as junk storage.

“Please?” Merrick added.

"I'll have a look," Cassidy said in a grudging tone.

"Thanks, Cass. We love you."

Cassidy strode into the library, dressed in all form-fitting black as usual. The scent of water-lily swirled in their wake. They tossed a long jacket with tattered silk hems to Merrick. "Here. Best I could find. I changed it from gray to blue and made the tatters more dramatic." Cassidy, like their daughter, was a matter-witch.

"Nice." Merrick slipped it on over his shirt and flapped his hands. The cuffs fell over his knuckles. "Too big, though."

"Sweet *Lady*. I'll fix it later, along with the wig." Cassidy spun to frown at Elemi. "It's seven-thirty. Have you started your homework?"

Elemi looked sheepish. "It's just one page."

"Math?"

"Social studies. A worksheet about why the rest of the world doesn't know about Eidolonia."

Merrick tugged at a loose button on the jacket. "Which is why?"

Elemi rolled her eyes. "Because of fae magic keeping everyone else away."

"Magic such as?" Cassidy said.

"Whirlpools, winds, fog, rocks that boats crash into."

"They're called sea stacks," Merrick said. "Also reefs."

"And people can't even see the island usually," Elemi added, in impatiently fast tones. "But if they do, they forget about it right afterward. The Crosswater Fade. And it's where the island's name comes from, because 'eidolon' means 'phantom.'"

"Among other definitions," Merrick conceded.

"What about satellites?" Sal challenged, her eyes twinkling.

"The magic messes them up so they can't take pictures."

"Good." Cassidy waved toward the doorway. "Go write all that down. Bet it won't even take you five minutes."

Elemi sighed melodramatically, but wandered out of the room, swinging her phone.

"Merrick," Cassidy said, "you printed all the labels for the festival scents, right?"

The button fell off the costume jacket. Merrick crouched to retrieve it.

“Yep, they’re ready.”

“I’m going to count all the bottles and make sure. I want to start decanting early tomorrow.” Without waiting for his response, Cassidy left the library.

“Cass still can’t trust anyone else to do things right,” Merrick said to Sal. “Especially me.” He pulled off the wig and dropped into the creaky armchair next to hers.

Sal took another sip of tea. The pearly-blue mug looked delicate in her leathery hands. “I assume the perfumes are your real contribution to the festival. Yours and Cassidy’s.”

“Yeah. The play is my friends’ project. They roped me in for a few cameos, including Larkin.” He had let go of the magic morphing his face, but touched his cheek where the beauty mark had been. “Will the fae be pleased, you think?”

“I’m entertained already,” she promised.

Tomorrow was the start of Water Festival, one of the seven festivals in the year during which Eidolonian humans produced gifts and displays of creativity to amuse and thank the fae. The festivals also helped soothe the occasional antagonisms that cropped up between fae and humans—though these days society was relatively peaceful, compared to the type of strife that people long ago like Prince Larkin had lived through.

Sal was a hob, a type of earth faery. She had been Merrick’s favorite professor at Ormaney University in Dasdemir, where he had earned a business degree while refining his magic. He had kept in touch with her after graduating, and since she was in Sevinee that week to visit relatives, Merrick had invited her up to Highvalley House for dinner.

Hobs rarely bothered with shape-shifting or glamour; they showed themselves as they were. In Sal’s case, this meant being stocky and short—she only came up to Merrick’s chest—with bright blue-black eyes, a nose longer than her hands, and pointed ears that stood up above her head like those of the Highvalleys’ corgi. Her coloring was mostly brown, but her nails and hair showed natural streaks of scarlet, pumpkin, and gold. She always smelled vaguely of garden soil, a warm note he found comforting.

“The friends doing the play,” she said. “Are they the same ones you hung

out with at university?”

“Mostly. Some live around here now. The others are visiting for the festival.” Merrick picked thread out of the button, his thoughts meandering to the people he used to spend all his free time with.

“My. What’s that somber expression for?”

He looked around at the library of Highvalley House, with its oddly-shaped skylights and shelves of dust-covered books. “Just thinking how it’s only been seven years since we graduated, but it seems longer. They’re all doing real adult things—marriage, pregnancy, careers—and I’m . . . this.”

“Talented perfumer and uncle to a great kid, living in a historic house in the Sevinee countryside? Could be worse.”

“Well. It is worse.”

“Hmm.” Sal swished her tea around in the mug. “I wasn’t going to ask. At least, not in front of Elemi.”

“Whether I’d been arrested during Earth Festival?” He spoke the words with astringent clarity.

“I take that as a yes.”

Merrick steepled his fingers. “We were visiting Dad in Dasedmir, and he’d built some flying gadgets for the celebration. He and his friends decided to use them to fly a banner down Spirit Street outside Parliament. It, uh . . . here’s a photo.” He scrolled through his phone to find it, and showed her.

All her facial features pulled upward in the hob equivalent of a smile. “*Tell the Earth the Truth: Riquelme Lies*. Well, the fae largely agree with you there. I’m a hundred and six, and I can’t remember ever having such an inept prime minister.”

“Inept’ is too kind. I prefer ‘lying and hypocritical.’ Anyway, Parliament guards saw the banner and shot a spell-jammer at one of Dad’s machines so it crashed on the street.”

“Oh,” Sal said in a falling tone of sympathy.

“So I picked up the banner and . . .” He arched his hand skyward. “Flew with it myself.”

“Ha. I expect they didn’t like that.”

“Nope. I knew they weren’t going to shoot *me* down, not with all those witnesses. At least things haven’t gotten that bad. But when I landed, about

eight police officers closed in and arrested me. Charged me with ‘unauthorized deployment of rare witch abilities.’ That’s a seven-hundred-lira fine, by the way.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. Though we can assume if I’d been flying with a ‘Riquelme is awesome’ banner, they’d have laughed and waved it off.”

“Ha. Likely.”

“So that’s my first strike for unauthorized magic. If I get to three—jail time. Which is . . . stressful to hear.”

“Back in university, I recall, you occasionally got dragged in to talk to professors for objectionable behavior, but it never went as far as arrests.” She smiled.

“But now we live in interesting times.”

“Rare witch abilities.” Sal sighed. “Yours isn’t dangerous, though. What harm are you going to do by flying for twenty minutes now and then?”

“I don’t know. We always had to be registered, but nothing much used to happen otherwise. Now they’re checking up on people like me. And arresting us as needed.”

Making temporary changes to his skin, giving himself a boost of super-speed, channeling ambient light to make his hand glow in lieu of a flashlight—those were all things any endo-witch could do, and were legally free to. Abilities like flying, however, were unusual, and authorities kept a tighter rein on such actions. Still, he hadn’t truly felt the legal oppression until lately.

“How is your father lately, anyway?” Sal asked.

Merrick touched the plastic orange strands of the wig lying across his lap. “Not getting any better. The healers have nothing. Seems the only hope is if our mother would show up, finally come out of the fae realm and tell us if there’s anything she could do. But she never has.”

“Is he happy, though?”

“Of course. Always.”

“Then maybe it isn’t something that needs to be fixed. Just accepted.”

Merrick threw the wig onto a table, where it draped a stack of books. “But I *want* to fix things. The way—well, the way Prince Larkin did.”

“By complete self-sacrifice?” Sal set her mug on the table. “I hope you

meet a better end than him.”

“He put the truce in place. He fixed a *lot* for the country. Along with Rosamund, I guess, since she made the deal and did the magic, but it’s a little hard to view her as a hero. She was almost as awful as Riquelme, with some of the land-grabs she pulled on the fae. Some people say she’s *why* Ula Kana started attacking. Kind of an ignoble ancestor to have.” He sent another glance around the house, with a rueful twist of his mouth.

“Nonetheless, a fascinating personage to us historians.”

“That reminds me . . .” Merrick turned his head, listening. Cassidy’s voice answered Elemi’s, down on a lower floor. He met Sal’s eyes. “Let me show you something.”

He went to the room that opened off the library, where Cassidy had been rummaging for old clothes. An eighteenth-century canopy bed took up half the space; in its honor, they called it the Canopy Bedroom.

Sal shuffled in after him and peered at the painting on the wooden underside of the bed canopy. It depicted a shipwreck in progress, with drowning sailors, snarling mer-people, and tempest-blowing air fae. Given the creepy décor, generally no one ever wanted to sleep there. Merrick certainly never had.

“Still haven’t figured out how to move this old thing, eh?” Sal wrapped a hand around one of the carved bedposts.

“Nope.” Merrick opened the top drawer of a chest. “Rosamund locked the whole bed in place. Who knows why. We have a thousand theories; can’t prove any of them.”

“Must hide something. No secret passages?”

“None would fit in the walls or floors. We’ve measured. But the bed’s old news. This is what I wanted to show you.” From the drawer he took out a faded cardboard box with its corners coming apart.

Sal peered over his arm. She poked a finger at the tarnished jewelry in the box. “Oh yes. Some spells in there somewhere.”

Merrick’s magic only extended to altering his own body, and he couldn’t sense spells on other people or things unless they were active enough to affect him. As a faery, however, Sal could pick up such information easily.

“Do you think any of it could be Rosamund’s?” he asked. “These things

were always in here, stashed with other junk. Our grandma told us she thought it all belonged to *her* grandmother. But the other day I noticed . . .” Merrick picked out an earring, a drop-shaped scarlet gem with gold leaves wrapped around it. “These look an awful lot like . . . these.” He pulled over a history textbook he’d left nearby and opened it to the page he had bookmarked.

The portrait in the book displayed Rosamund Highvalley, wide-bosomed and beaming with triple-witch pride in her three colors of sashes—and wearing gold-and-red earrings that exactly resembled the pair he had found.

“Well, well,” Sal said.

“I’d gotten this book down to look up something for Elemi’s homework. And that same day I got out this box to make room for other stuff. When I saw the earrings, the connection clicked.”

Sal held the earring in her palm, then set it back on top of the chest. “Might be the same ones, but these aren’t enchanted. The spells are attached to something else in here.” She kept poking, shoving aside bird-shaped pins, gaudy cufflinks, and tangled strings of fake pearls.

Merrick’s heart beat fast. “Please, please let it be her Lava Flow charm.”

Sal laughed. “The palace already has that. It’s in their museum.”

“Maybe she made another one. A charm to cure people of fae spells is exactly what my dad needs.”

“Good luck using it, even if you somehow got hold of it. Rosamund’s talents were unparalleled and her charms were often too complex for others to grasp . . . ah.” She pulled out a silver chain, thread-thin and at least three feet long.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Resistance charm. Just in case anyone’s trying persuasion magic on you. Still potent, if you need one.”

“Oh.” Merrick took it, wrapping its length around his hand. “We can buy these, though.”

“This one feels stronger than the over-the-counter ones. But there’s still something else in here . . . a-ha.” After another few seconds of rummaging, she drew out a gray stick, five inches long and as thick as Merrick’s thumb. It was carved with spiraling designs and had copper wire wrapped around one

end, gone green with age. “Summoning stick. Definitely not legal to own these days.”

Magic to force anyone to do anything against their will—even just come to you—had been against the law in Eidolonia since the early nineteenth century. Shield charms, like the chain, existed to protect people in case someone illegally tried.

Decent finds. But neither held the magic he had hoped for.

His shoulders sank. “No Lava Flow charm, then.”

“Sorry. Both still powerful, though. Rosamund really did have a talent for locking her charms into place.” She turned the stick to admire each side, then handed it to Merrick. “The lawful thing to do would be to turn it over to the Researchers Guild. Other option? Put it back in that box and pretend you don’t know it’s there.” She twitched one ear, her equivalence of a wink.

He folded his fingers around the summoning stick, drawing it up against his chest. “Would it work on a faery?”

CHAPTER 2

AT TEN O’CLOCK THAT NIGHT, AFTER DROPPING Sal off at her second-cousin’s place, Merrick drove up a wooded hillside a few miles from Highvalley House, where the road curved close to the verge. The stars shone between feathery black treetops. The nearest houses were a mile downhill, and the road was quiet. He pulled over, got out, and tiptoed into the woods.

He knew when he had reached the verge, for the air crackled and sparked, stinging him with tiny electric jolts—a warning installed by the fae. The sparks flashed upon the sign on a nearby post, set up by the Eidolonian government:

WARNING!

Crossing the verge poses grave dangers to humans. Emergency assistance cannot reliably be reached past this line. Respect the truce: do not enter!

Merrick drew back a step, enough to stop the sparking, and stared into the forbidden land.

He had chosen a spot between two guard posts, which were stationed every mile throughout Eidolonia, a perimeter loop of over six hundred miles circling the center of the island. Signs like this one were posted all along it. It would have been easy enough to tell the line of demarcation regardless, for in fae territory many of the trees were immense, over a hundred feet tall and three times wider than the span of Merrick’s arms. The smell of earth, moss, berry, and leaf rolled out from the forest, thick and alive. Little glowing forms moved about in the forest’s looming darkness, at every height from the treetops down to the ground—either luminescent fae or floating lights created by them.

“Summoning stick probably won’t work if you use it from the human

side of the verge,” Sal had said. “But I can’t recommend you cross over, of course. Maybe, if you stand right up next to it . . . well, it’s worth a try. Just be careful.”

Unlike his father, he had never crossed the verge, though he longed to. Being half fae, he felt he ought to have some right to go in there, should be able to expect some safety. But it didn’t work like that. He was counted as human: mortal and thus vulnerable.

He took out the summoning stick from his sweatshirt pocket. At Sal’s suggestion, he had wrapped a few of his own black hairs around it and had tied on a blue feather dropped by a kiryo bird.

He held up the stick to the starry night sky. “I summon Haluli, air faery, my mother. I ask her to come to me.”

Her name means “blue feather” in their language, his father had told him. Or “feather blue,” is how she put it. The feather of the kiryo bird.

Merrick had tried before, of course, standing at the verge and calling her name. She had never come. But he’d never had a summoning stick before, let alone one made by Rosamund Highvalley.

Lightning illuminated the tips of the trees. Thunder rolled against the mountainside. Something whipped past his ear, then chattered from a nearby branch, sounding like an angry finch. Merrick squinted into the dark, trying to see. The wind picked up, blowing his hair into his eyes. He held the carved stick higher and channeled his magic into it, pulling it from the air.

Clouds spread across the stars. Thunder crackled closer.

“Hey, stop! What are you doing?”

A wallop of magic hit him in the spine. His limbs went rigid and he fell onto his back. Someone seized his arm. Lying on the damp leaves, he found himself squinting up into the flashlights of two guards.

One was an exo-witch—someone who could manipulate other living things, but not her own body. Merrick knew it from the magic paralyzing him, as well as from the yellow sash across her uniform coat. Endo-witches, people like Merrick who could only use magic to alter themselves, wore a red sash when working officially. That said, when it came to magic, working officially was not something Merrick often did.

The other guard, a thickset man in his fifties, wore a green sash—a

matter-witch. He tucked his flashlight under his arm and reached out. The carved stick flew out of Merrick's grasp and into the man's hand.

"What were you doing at the verge this late?" the woman asked. "Trying to get fae-struck?"

"Trying to meet my mother. She's a faery." The fae half of him made it difficult to lie outright. He often wished his absentee mother had been one of the deceptive types of fae so he could indulge more easily in the human habit of dishonesty.

"This is a summoning stick." The man held it up. "Got a license for it?"

"No. I found it. Just keep it and let me go, okay? I won't try anything else."

The exo-witch still had Merrick's limbs frozen. "Afraid we've got to write this up. What's your name? Can we see some identification, please?"

Merrick sighed. "In my back pocket."

They found his wallet, read his driver's license, and ran a check on a phone screen.

"Merrick Highvalley," the man said. "Age twenty-nine. Perfumer, co-owner, Mirage Isle Perfumes. Endo-witch, registered with rare witch abilities—only human in Eidolonia with the power of flight. Huh."

"I'll just go home. I swear," Merrick said, still immobilized on the ground.

"Sorry, friend." The woman released her magic hold and replaced it with a hand around his arm. She pulled him to his feet. "Looks like this is your second offense. We have to give you a citation, and we'll be escorting you home ourselves."

They marched him toward the road.

"No—listen. I'm trying to help my father," Merrick said. "He's aging too fast, all because my mother took him into the fae realm a couple of times. No one's been able to help him. *She* might. I just need her to come talk to me."

"That's not how to go about it." The woman got out a small printing computer from the patrol car and began tapping buttons. "Use and possession of an unauthorized summoning charm is against the law."

Merrick looked away, his jaw clenched. The woman printed out the citation and handed it to him. He ignored it a few seconds before snatching it.

Lightning flashed again, dancing across the curdled undersides of the clouds.

CHAPTER 3

“WHAT DID YOU THINK WOULD HAPPEN?” CAS-
sidy sounded long-suffering rather than angry. Although a bit angry too.

Merrick had come home late last night, his car tailed by the police, who luckily had their lights and sirens off and thus hadn't woken Cassidy. But he'd told his sibling everything this morning, since there was no hiding the fact that he had a court appearance in a couple of weeks.

“It was worth a try,” he muttered.

Cassidy leaned on the parapet next to him, on the rooftop deck of High-valley House. A March mist lay on the forest. The air was still cool enough that they both wore jackets, though Eidolonia rarely got much colder than this. Snow usually only fell on the highest peaks, and all of those were in fae territory.

Where Merrick would apparently never, ever go.

“Our mom hasn't come to see us our whole lives,” Cassidy said. “Why would she now?”

“Because someone forced her to with a summoning stick, I was thinking.”

“Look, either she doesn't know about Dad's condition or she doesn't care. I'm guessing the latter, since they seem pretty good at knowing what we're doing.”

The fae, they meant, were good at monitoring humans. Eidolonia had been entirely fae territory until the early 1700s, when the curious fae decided to let a few ocean explorers ashore, one ship after another over the years: Europeans, Hawaiians, Asians, natives of the Americas. To those humans who had consented to behave in a cooperative fashion rather than attempting conquest, the fae had extended an invitation to live on the island.

When it became clear that living on Eidolonia awakened witch powers in about half of humans too, magical innovation became another perk: for humans to experiment with and for fae to watch in amusement. But few hu-

mans ever doubted that the fae were in charge on this island.

“So where are we now?” Cassidy said. “One more offense and you’re in jail.”

“Yep.”

“You have to stop pulling crap like this. We can’t change what’s happening to Dad. He doesn’t even mind. He says it’s worth it, to have produced us.”

“He says that, but he also wants to have adventures, invent things, go places, and now he’s getting so frail he can’t, and . . .” Merrick abandoned the diatribe. Cassidy knew all this.

They shot a glance at him, their eyes the same near-black as their father’s, though enhanced with a perfect double layer of blue and black eyeliner.

“What good would it do him to have his son in prison?” Cassidy asked. “Or Elemi, have you thought about how upset it would make her to have her uncle locked up?”

“Of course I’ve thought of it.”

“I’m not sure you have. You think you should get to do whatever the hell you want. Experiment with magic, sneak around, break laws, who cares; those laws weren’t in place for a good reason or anything.”

“Some of them aren’t,” he pointed out. “Especially with the current administration.”

“Well. True.” Cassidy squinted out across the hillside. “I know it’s been a tough year.”

“Two of my best friends moved away. I broke up with Feng. Who got into the Researchers Guild when I didn’t. And Riquelme got elected. Yeah, tough year.”

“You can try again for the Researchers. Then you’d get to experiment with magic if they accept you.”

“*If* I don’t have those perfect test scores or that immaculately responsible record. Especially now.”

“Well, is it so awful being an awesome uncle—better than her dad who never wants to see her—”

“Asshole,” Merrick put in, which was all the conversation Cassidy’s ex merited.

“Exactly. An awesome uncle and an actually not too bad perfumer—isn’t

it a good life?”

He tried to smile. It felt halfhearted. “I love Elemi, you know that. And perfume. Even though . . . sometimes it feels like perfumery is *your* vocation and I just tagged along because it was easy.”

“Excuse me. Perfumery is not easy. Very few have the nose or the interest for it. You do in fact have talent, idiot.”

“You just know it’d cost too much to hire someone with real skill. I’m cheap labor.”

“Obviously. So come to the lab and help us bottle up the festival scents.” Cassidy stepped back from the parapet. “Oh, meant to tell you—lightning hit that old cedar in the east garden last night. Pretty sure it’s a goner.”

“The one with the gargoyle under it?”

“Yeah. That might’ve taken a hit too. I had to get Elemi to school. Didn’t have time to haul branches around and look.”

Lightning. Which had flared up right after he’d activated the summoning stick.

Merrick’s gaze moved to the east garden below. “I’ll check it out.”



Merrick tromped through the garden, past statues, trellises, trees, and overgrown hedges. Rosamund Highvalley, the sister of their many-times-great-grandfather, had designed the gardens as well as Highvalley House. Rosamund’s father had been a Welsh mapmaker aboard one of the first ships, his name changed to “Highvalley” when his shipmates deemed his Welsh name unpronounceable; it had referenced a valley among the mountains of northern Wales. Her mother was an indigenous South American healer who had joined the voyage when the ship docked in her town for a few days. During those first disordered years of settlement on Eidolonia, the pair negotiated a few impressive land-acquisition deals with the fae and thus became rich by island standards. Their ambition manifested several times stronger in their daughter, who was born with the most astonishing set of magical powers Eidolonia had ever known in a human, especially remarkable in someone with no fae blood at all.

Magical trinkets, accordingly, were still scattered all over her property.

Cassidy and Merrick, along with previous Highvalleys, had turned over several such items to the Researchers Guild, since magic use was far more restricted these days than it had been in the eighteenth century. But some pieces, like the summoning stick, went unnoticed for years among the clutter.

Merrick swatted a drooping willow branch out of his way, knocking raindrops onto his head. Though he generally didn't admit it out loud, he envied Rosamund Highvalley. In her day, witches wreaked all kinds of havoc, true, but at least they got to *use* their powers. Merrick was only allowed to fly during formal magical instruction, or if hired for the purpose by a licensed employer—often a governmental agency, such as rescuers who helped pluck people off sea-cliffs when they got careless in their rock climbing.

Flying took so much energy that he could only do it for about twenty minutes at a time, a couple of times a day at most. He flew anyway, every chance he got, because next to sex it was the most thrilling activity he had ever experienced.

Thanks to his thrill-seeking, he now stood one strike away from being jailed.

He shivered and cast his glance ahead to the lightning-blasted cedar.

Splintered green boughs lay all over the path, their ends blackened. With his foot he shoved at a low branch, which ripped free, releasing a burst of raw cedar scent. New perfume idea: Tree Killed by Lightning. Notes of Pacific island cedar, petrichor, moss, and smoke. Sounded pretty good. He'd run it by Cassidy later.

The gargoyle-like statue that squatted beneath the tree had sustained a deep vertical crack. He grabbed one of its stone wings and jiggled it. The statue broke in half, tumbling out of his hand, and he winced in regret.

Then he noticed its interior was hollow, and something was inside. Something about the size and shape of a shoebox.

After staring mesmerized for a moment, he pulled it loose, out into the daylight for the first time since . . . when?

The box was wrapped in a thick cloth—he guessed it was what they used to call oilcloth—with a pattern of strawberries and leaves, faded and grimy. He unwrapped it and dropped the cloth with a twitch when several root-beetles and centipedes came squirming out of its folds. The plain metal box

seemed intact beneath the cloth, its lid tightly fitted.

On an island like Eidolonia, and especially on a property of Rosamund Highvalley's, it was unwise to open mysterious boxes you'd found inside garden statues.

All the same, maybe she'd hidden a second Lava Flow charm here, or something else that could help Merrick's father. Maybe his mother somehow knew about it and had broken open the gargoyle to give it to him. Lightning was more often associated with fire fae, but many air fae could conjure it too. Besides, booby-trapped boxes weren't the kind of thing that happened *often* or anything . . .

Willing to take the consequences, he pried at the lid with a stick until it popped off.

Nothing happened, and nothing inside moved. He sat on a fallen cedar branch with the open box in his lap. It contained a leather-bound book and a jumble of items of metal, wood, glass, and stone. He lifted the book out and opened it.

A sheet of paper was stuck in the front. Merrick unfolded it and deciphered the handwriting in purplish-blue ink.

This box with these items of Rosamund's was left for me upon our roof, presumably by fae, the day before yesterday, more than six months after she disappeared. She had taken the box with her on her expedition into their realm. I have received no word of what became of her, and perhaps I never will.

I do not think anyone can do what Rosamund proposes in this book when she herself could not. All have accepted the loss of Prince Larkin. Let him rest. She was nonetheless a noble witch for seeking a way to free him, and I know that it tormented her to have done what she did. Let the Lord, Lady, and Spirit alone judge her, and may they bring peace to us all, including His Highness, whether he sleep forever or wake again one day.

To honour her I hide this book and her possessions rather than destroy them, whilst still hoping that no one attempts this dangerous endeavour should they find this.

Philomena Quintal

Oct. 3rd, 1804

CHAPTER 4

MERRICK SMOOTHED THE BRITTLE PAPER, frowning. Philomena Quintal had been Rosamund's wife, and a witch as well. He didn't remember all the historical details, but he knew Rosamund had fallen out of favor with the court after the war with Ula Kana, then some years later, had set out on a research mission into the fae realm and never returned.

The letter suggested Rosamund felt tormented for putting Prince Larkin into the sleep. Merrick had never heard that interpretation. Why should she regret it? Larkin had volunteered. Confining Ula Kana into an enchanted sleep and doing the same to a royal was the only deal the fae ambassadors had been able to bring to the table. Larkin's lover had been killed in the attacks, so he had opted to go to sleep forever to save the island. Such was the tragically romantic story, at least. Merrick couldn't imagine why Rosamund would have wanted to wake the prince again and break the truce.

Merrick began reading Rosamund's journal, deciphering each scribble, abbreviation, and sketch as best as he could. It took long enough that his leg was starting to fall asleep from his perch on the branch. But he stayed, staring at the pages with a chill spreading around his heart.

A letter from Rosamund to the prince, written in the middle pages of the journal, told it clearly enough.

HRH Prince Larkin

Your Royal Highness,

There is little I can say to express my chagrin at the injustice I did you. As I told you when placing the spell upon you, I did it only to save all who remained of our people, all those we loved. Ula Kana needed to be stopped. But as I also told you then, and meant with my whole heart, I do not intend to leave you in this sleep forever. That is a fate no human, and possibly no faery either, should

suffer, not unless he should volunteer himself willingly, which we both know you did not.

I am working to free you. I have put measures in place to do so. But given the nature of the agreement with the fae, this is a most difficult endeavour. It requires confining Ula Kana some new way, and if I could have done so before, I would have, but time was running out. She had already destroyed much of the city and would return any day to demolish the rest. You remember everybody's panic and fear, and I hope you understand why I acted thus.

I am beginning to despair that I will ever achieve the task of imprisoning her in some alternate fashion. Most of the fae will not work further toward any common purpose with me, and I cannot do it without them. Too many resent the way I have used magic to acquire land for humans—unfairly, as they see it.

It therefore may be, noble friend, that I do not live to see this plan come to fruition. If this is so, then it is my wish that some other witch undoes what has been the greatest shame and most egregious crime of my life, and awakens you, once they have solved the problem of Ula Kana.

I cannot at this time trust the palace or government with this knowledge or this task. I have thus arranged it so that you can be rescued without their involvement, if need be. They and I have between us too many strong disagreements and irreparable ruptures. Indeed, as you will know now if you are awake and reading this, they have ended my tenure as court sorcerer, largely due to their bitterness over losing you along with so many citizens. There has been much dismay with witches among the general public, and you will have found that your views on restricting magic use are the more popular by now, and that you have very nearly won our long-ongoing debate.

I may regret that fact and still strive for more magical freedom, but all the same, friend, I hope you believe me when I say I do not excuse myself, and never have, for what I did to you, and if you are reading this letter, then I am most sincerely glad you have been rescued.

*I remain, even in spirited opposition, your faithful subject,
Rosamund Highvalley*

Merrick's gaze drifted up from the page, settling on the broken shards of statuary.

Larkin hadn't volunteered. Rosamund had forced him into the sleep. And no one had ever known, except Philomena, and Larkin himself. Who still lay in Floriana Palace in Dasedmir, trapped asleep in the bower for two hundred and twenty years against his will.

Sweet Lord and Lady.

Rescue him!, Merrick's heart shouted. Not that he knew how—the journal didn't seem to address that. Surely he should at least inform the government and the palace? Let them free their long-imprisoned relative?

He made himself take a deep breath and began leafing back through the journal. No, nobody could just free Larkin. Even if it were easy—even if the palace did know how, which they probably did—they weren't going to, because waking the prince would free Ula Kana too. She would rise up from her sleep, in her guarded cell in Arlanuk's realm, and undoubtedly resume terrorizing humanity. Still, the injustice nagged at him.

This was silly. It was only because he'd been thinking about Larkin recently, trying on his face for the festival play. Larkin had been asleep for over two centuries. The issue could wait.

As for Rosamund: this piece of the historic record definitely didn't improve her already-problematic reputation, but she hadn't been a complete villain either. She did want to free Larkin, but had disappeared before she could accomplish it.

On some pages, Rosamund had sketched maps of fae territory. She had also drawn what seemed to be the items in the box, but what they were for, he couldn't tell. He'd need an expert in magical history, such as Sal, to decipher Rosamund's shorthand. Somehow all of it added up to a plan to contain Ula Kana after breaking the sleep spell, he assumed.

He rummaged through the box. There was another summoning stick, like the one the verge guards had confiscated. He also found three triangular obsidian blades, a dark blue polished stone sphere, a pink crystal egg, a small silver hammer, a clay ball with a wick, and a wooden bead carved into a flower.

At the bottom of the box lay a little glass bottle containing a transparent violet-blue liquid, stopped up with a cork. Merrick held it to the sunlight, squinted, and, despite his professional curiosity about what might be a per-

fume, decided to be smart and *not* open it and sniff it.

These, not the journal, were surely the real treasures. Finding a shocking historical document might gain him some renown, if he chose to share it. But a box full of magical charms created by Rosamund Highvalley? *Those* he was keeping. No way would he hand them over to the passel of crooks in the government offices in Dasdemir.

He set the bottle down and returned to the book. The last drawing in its pages was something he recognized: the immovable bed, in the Canopy Bedroom. Next to it, she had written the words *To Lava Flower* and a sketch of a flower.

The flower sketch appeared to match the wooden bead from the box. It was a bit larger than an Eidolonian cent, had a hole in its center, and was carved into the five-pointed shape of a lava flower, a native flowering succulent that grew in lava beds.

Lava Flower, not Lava *Flow*, but . . .

Maybe she *was* referencing the Lava Flow charm, which would be a useful thing to bring along when facing the risk of fae enchantment. Calling it “lava flower” could have been a play on words. And perhaps the charm wasn’t this bead, but the bead was the key to unlock its hiding place—which could be in the immovable bed. Merrick could find it and use it to cure his father.

His hands tingled with the desire to rush to the Canopy Bedroom and start searching.

But he had work to do in the perfume lab with Cassidy. His exploration would have to wait.

After setting everything back in the box, he carried it to the house. He trotted up the stone steps to the tall front door, shouldered it open, and threw his weight against it to shut it once inside. The whump resounded upward into the rotunda. Highvalley House was a huge round building, three stories of red and black volcanic stone topped with a dome. Its style was allegedly inspired by Radcliffe Camera at Oxford University, though Rosamund had intended it from the start as her countryside residence rather than a collegiate library.

Merrick strode out across the light-and-dark-brown checkered tiles. Wisps of dog, cat, and rabbit hair swirled in the corners. Cobwebs laced

themselves between the tops of the pillars holding up the second and third floors, and the glass dome had become spotted and grimy. Merrick supposed Rosamund had kept the place cleaner than they did, requiring nothing but a flick of the wrist and a burst of magic. None of the Highvalleys after her had possessed quite that much power. Nor had they retained their status as nobility—he and Cassidy, despite owning Highvalley House, had only meager savings and the modest income from Mirage Isle Perfumes, and no connection to the palace anymore.

A scampering of claws echoed through the hall. Jasmine, their corgi, shot out of the kitchen and skidded over to circle Merrick's ankles, yodeling in delight.

“Shh.” Merrick bent to pet her between the ears. “Jaz. Hush it up.”

“Merrick?” Cassidy stuck their head out of the door to the perfume lab, on the north side of the ground floor. “Where have you been? I'm doing all the work here.”

He used Jasmine as a shield to hide the box, which he set on the floor next to her. “Sorry. I was in the garden. You're right, that gargoyle's broken. You could probably repair it if you want.”

“Ugh.” Cassidy waved a white strip of paper under their nose, probably sprayed with one of their Water Festival scents. “It was hideous. Not sure it's worth it.”

“True. Well, I'll be in soon.” He waited until Cassidy vanished back into the lab, then he grabbed the box and bolted up the stairs.

He'd show Cassidy the box eventually. But they'd only talk him out of using anything in it. He just wanted to investigate a little first.

No harm in that, surely?

CHAPTER 5

BY ELEVEN O’CLOCK, CASSIDY AND ELEMI HAD gone to bed in their rooms on the second floor. Merrick’s room was on the third floor, same as the Canopy Bedroom. Using the flashlight on his phone, he crept along the curving balcony above the entrance hall. The lava-flower bead, threaded onto a red string, was tied around his wrist so he wouldn’t drop it under a piece of furniture. Barefoot, he kept to the rug runner that topped the polished stone floor to deaden his footsteps. Their Flemish giant rabbit, Hydrangea, who usually slept on a blanket in Merrick’s room, followed a few steps behind, occasionally pausing to nibble the rug. She limped a little, one of her front paws still bandaged from a scuffle yesterday with the cat, but kept up with him easily.

Dew misted the skylights in the library; starlight filtered through in a fuzzy glow. He continued past the bookcases and on to the Canopy Bedroom, almost stepping on Hydrangea when she hopped in his way. She jumped aside, affronted, ears twitching, then was diverted by a magazine on the floor, which she began chewing. Merrick turned the brass doorknob and entered the bedroom.

His flashlight splashed along the faded colors of the Turkish rug. He considered switching on the overhead light, then, with a glance at the window, opted against it, in case Cassidy woke up and looked outside and wondered why a light from the house was shining on the trees. He picked his way between a rocking chair, a trunk, and a settee, all banished from other rooms, and reached the bed.

The entire bed frame, including posts, canopy, and lion’s-paw feet, could not be moved, taken apart, chipped, dented, or even painted over. It imperviously resisted all such attempts. Its posts were decorated with carved figures with closed eyes and swords held pointed down their bodies. Cassidy and Merrick’s grandmother had set a mattress on the bed frame with a sheet

tucked over it to make it look less abandoned, and there it had stayed.

She had died seven years ago. By then Cassidy, Elemi, and Merrick lived here too and had converted the ground floor parlor into a perfume lab, with her blessing. Whatever this piece of furniture concealed, it likely wouldn't live up to the tales his grandmother had spun about the house's hidden magic.

A pang touched his heart. He imagined her voice urging him on: *Well, see what you can find! Show me!*

On his knees on the mattress, he examined the wooden headboard by flashlight. It stood almost six feet high, coming to a rounded point in the middle, its edge carved into curls. He couldn't find any whorl in the carvings that looked like a lava flower, nor anything that seemed to be a keyhole of sorts, assuming this bead was meant to be a key. He pivoted the light toward a bedpost. His other hand settled on the headboard. The bead, on its string, clicked against the wood.

A crack resounded through the room, a jolt that started at his fingers and slammed through his whole body, like someone had struck the headboard with a giant hammer. Merrick jerked his hand away. The bead and the bed both seemed undamaged, as did his hand, aside from tingling a little.

Then he lifted his gaze, blinked, and refocused.

The headboard was shimmering, disappearing. The posts, canopy, and mattress remained; only the headboard had turned into . . . a window? A portal? The shimmer was clearing, revealing a tangle of foliage, with a starlit space beyond.

The hairs lifted on his arms. He leaned closer. He couldn't see through the vines, aside from those gray fragments of air. Nothing moved, and all he heard from within was the faint rustle of leaves. He smelled fresh greenery and old stone.

He had heard of portals, but never seen one. Only the fae could create or control them, along with one or two legendarily talented witches in times past, who had worked for the government or royal family.

One being Rosamund Highvalley.

Merrick reached through the space where the headboard used to be, breathing shallow and fast. This was probably very stupid; something could bite his fingers off, or seize him and drag him in, or . . .

Cool air bathed his hand. His arm felt squeezed or stretched at the threshold, exactly the way people described the bodily effect of moving through a portal. He let his fingers brush the leaves, then yanked his hand back and waited. No spell overtook him, and all he found on his fingers was a trace of dust.

Wiping it off on the sheet, he frowned. With the headboard gone, how would he close the portal if he wanted to? He could hardly leave it like this. He touched the flower-bead to one of the bedposts, and the portal vanished, sealing itself back up into headboard shape. Feeling its loss like a pang, he immediately touched it again with the bead.

It reopened gamely. He stared at the curtain of leaves. They fluttered a little with the gust created by the portal opening, then fell still.

He slid a hand into the tangle of vines. They resisted, tendrils catching and tearing. He went in with both hands. The rustling sounds echoed beyond, as if it were a cave. Where was this place? Somewhere within the fae realm? If so, he hoped to the powers above that he wasn't attracting the attention of something monstrous that lived in it.

For a moment he thought uneasily of the spookier varieties of fae. Whitefingers, who lurked in birch forests and could cause insanity or death with one touch of their long bone-white fingers. Kelpies, who came surging out of lakes and streams to devour people. Fair feasters, who enchanted humans into falling in love with them, then slowly killed them by feeding upon their blood over the course of days or months.

He made himself *stop* thinking of those.

He'd begun leaning on the vines while trying to part them, teetering on his knees on the head of the mattress. Then a thick vine gave way, dropping out from under his elbow. Merrick went toppling into the portal.

He landed on flat stone with a grunt, a few feet below. In panic he leaped back up to make sure the portal hadn't closed behind him, but no, there the spare bedroom waited, beyond the vines. He reached through to touch the mattress, to reassure himself. Then he turned around.

With a shout of terror, he scrambled back against the wall.

Stone walls enclosed the room. The floor was a mosaic of colored tiles. A seven-sided glass window in the high ceiling let in the diffused light from

the night sky. On the stone bier a few paces away lay the body of a young man, formally dressed, one hand on his chest, the other on the iron sword at his side.

But not a dead body. Not exactly.

He recognized this place, this sleeper. Any Eidolonian would.

This was Prince Larkin's Bower, in the heart of the palace, honored and guarded at all hours, no one allowed to enter its sanctity since it was sealed up in 1799.

And Merrick was inside it.