

BLUEBEARD'S BRIDE

BONUS SCENE



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ZAFIR'S POV DURING THE LOVE POTION SCENE



I froze, horrified by how I was behaving. “Make a note,” I told her gruffly. “The love potion works. The end.”

Her smirk was going to drive me insane. If I didn’t stop myself, she would be able to guess the exact thoughts that had been parading through my head in full color and vivid detail. Oh, phoenixes, she was going to laugh at me. I didn’t think I’d be able to stand it if she did.

“We need much more detailed notes than that,” she said with that same mischievous grin. “Tell me about your exact reaction.”

I looked up at the ceiling and clenched my fists. What would I be able to say that wouldn’t reveal my true feelings? Anything I said needed to be attributed to the potion, not my own traitorous heart.

She’s off-limits, I told myself firmly. She’s seeing Julian and only barely had her previous marriage annulled. She’s made it clear she has no interest in me and I’ll respect her choice. I was the one who forced her to be chained to me. It doesn’t matter that she is smart and pretty and that I want to kiss her—

No, I couldn't think about that.

I cleared my throat and began listing the most medical symptoms that were still true. "Elevated heart rate, mild warmth in my chest, increased attention to detail." Sweat beaded onto my forehead as the pomegranate scent that lingered around her wafted over to me. "You might want to write that down," I instructed her. "Over there." I waved at the other side of the room, praying she would go and take her addicting scent with her. If she didn't, I might do something ridiculous.

Flames alive, I was close to starting to act like Julian. If I did, I may as well fling myself off Ascension Point from the humiliation.

"What sort of details did you start noticing?" she asked, scribbling away on a notepad and not nearly far enough away.

"Nothing important," I said, putting every fiber of my being into sounding calm and looking away from her. If I looked at her now, I wouldn't be able to stop. Each second that passed caused me physical pain and any hope that my still heart potion would counteract the infatuation elixir evaporated faster than water in the desert. I had expected a few idle fantasies or daydreams, but nothing even remotely this powerful. I didn't just want Alia, I *needed* her. It was essential to my survival.

"Zafir!" she scolded. "This is *all* important if we want this to work."

I couldn't help it. I snuck another look at her, but the sight of her pursed lips and her fist on her hip made me feel as if I was about to fly into a thousand pieces. How I wanted her to scold me and never stop. She had to know what she was doing to me, but I had to resist.

I pivoted to face the opposite wall, staring hard at the window.

"Your appearance, personality, and mannerisms, mostly. There seem to be some distracting—distracted! Distracted, intrusive thoughts." Curses, I could still see her reflection in the window panes.

I'm more of a fool than Julian ever was, I berated myself furiously. I had asked for this. I had willingly taken the potion and was stupid enough to think I would be strong enough to resist.

Alia came around to stand near the window, notepad still in hand. I couldn't help my gaze flicking over to her and my heart began to pound even harder than before. A woman who cared about potion-making and knew enough to take notes about side effects and document the process was a rare woman indeed. Julian wouldn't ever appreciate her the way I did. If Alia and I worked together, we could make any potion. If I confessed my feelings, she might consent to stay. We could always live together.

"Describe your thoughts." She was waiting expectantly for me, with no idea how much agony I was in.

Heat crept up my neck and ears. "I just did. They don't make sense."

I ground my teeth together and fought the urge to set fire to her notes. I'd never felt so jealous of a few pieces of paper in my entire life. How was I supposed to put into words that I wanted her hands on *me* instead of that notepad?

"You can do better than that. Besides, we already talked about this. It's the potion talking, not you."

That was right. If I did blurt out something about Alia's appearance or personality, it would be the potion's fault, not mine. I might not have another opportunity to experiment

with romance. What would she do if I feigned needing to fix her makeup yet again and pressed my lips against hers? I would be able to find out if she tasted like those pomegranates she always smelled like.

She reached out and squeezed my hand. "I know you hate me too much to actually fall in love."

I could move in and blame the potion. She would likely even forgive it under the guise of scientific research. But I couldn't take advantage of her that way. She deserved better.

I closed my eyes so I wasn't as tempted and slowly pulled my hand out of her grasp. "Alia, please stop."

"Then you better give me more verbal feedback."

She wouldn't stop until I gave her something to write down, and a few medical symptoms weren't enough. I inwardly cringed as I realized I'd have to bare some of the embarrassing images flashing through my head at top speed.

"I felt the urge to strike up conversation and thought of opportunities to spend time with you. I wanted...I wanted to touch you." The understatement of a century, but it would have to do.

Most thankfully, she retreated to the desk to put her notepad down and wrote, hunched over and not looking in my direction. "What else?"

I didn't answer right away and Alia turned to face me, quill in hand as she waited.

"I imagined—very briefly—kissing you," I choked out, more embarrassed than I ever had been in my entire life. "Curse this elixir."

She grinned again, and as I looked at her mouth, I wanted nothing more than to stride across the room and find out exactly what it felt like to kiss her. If she wanted to

take notes and document results, she could study that. I'd quite enjoy giving a lesson like that.

"And such an image didn't revolt you?" she asked.

The heat in my face had to be hotter than the Eternal Flame. "Ah, no. Quite the opposite, actually. I can't...can't stop the images from intruding my thoughts."

What if there was a situation where Alia actually chose me? She had made it clear she wasn't genuinely interested in Julian and had already dissolved her marriage with Rahil. I could find a way to prove to her that I would make her happy. I would treat her the way she deserved. If Rahil ever tried to reclaim Alia, I would find a way to save her and then she would undoubtedly shower affection upon her valiant rescuer. She would lean in and—

"So we *know* the potion is working then. Excellent. I look forward to slipping it into Julian's drink."

Julian? All this time of torturing me, she'd been thinking of *him*? "We *can't* give this to him," I snarled. My vision turned red as I imagined him touching Alia, holding her, kissing her... I couldn't let it happen.

"Why not? He's the perfect mark to give this to."

"He also lacks my self-restraint." I couldn't keep the venom out of my voice. If Julian had any love potion whatsoever, he would be all over Alia. "I wouldn't wish this on him," I said coldly.

"Meaning you wouldn't wish *me* on him?"

"No!" My chest was going to burst from trying to restrain myself so much. "Meaning that this reaction is significantly stronger than I expected. If I'm struggling, Julian doesn't stand a chance."

"But that's what we want. We want him to fall for me and hand over his purse."

Of course she was still thinking of this like some ruse.

Did she not know that if I saw another man with her, I would very likely kill him? The intensity of my emotions frightened me. After years of the still heart suppressing my emotions every day, this was way more than I was prepared to handle. I couldn't do it.

"I don't ever want Julian to picture you like I just—" My throat closed off. "He can't think of you this way. No one should. In fact—" I snatched up my abandoned jacket and threw it over her. "I don't even want to see you right now. I'm already tempted enough as it is."

Immediately, I wanted to cut out my own tongue. It's just told her I was tempted. She would know just how desperately I wanted her. She was sure to be under that jacket, smug and laughing to herself at what a buffoon I really was. If only she'd been scared upon meeting me like everyone else always was, this would've been so much easier. The shield I'd carefully built around my heart had crumbled to dust, all because I was a pathetic, love-struck fool.

Alia carefully lifted the jacket. I braced myself for more teasing, but there was a new softness to her face and voice that hadn't been there before.

"It seems the second dose of the potion might have been a mistake."

"Clearly." I carefully draped the jacket back over her. "I've made enough of a fool of myself and I don't wish to continue."

There was a long minute of silence during which there were several other images and thoughts that popped into my head that proved impossible to wish away and made me devoutly grateful that Alia wasn't able to read minds.

Her voice came from beneath the jacket, slightly muffled. "How long are the effects supposed to last?"

"At least another hour."

"Can you make an antidote?"

I threw a look at the sand trickling down into the bottom half of the hourglass and wiped the sweat off my brow. "Not in the allotted time left. Just don't talk. Or move. Or exist. It's too distracting."

Her shoulders shook slightly, but she stayed covered. "I shall cease to exist for the next hour, then."

"Good." I picked up the closest book without even looking at the title. "I'm going to read. Silently. In the corner."

I held the book an inch away my face and the letters squiggled together to form a fuzzy haze that proved impossible to read, but I wouldn't have been able to read even if I wanted to. Everything in me screamed to throw the book aside and beg Alia to be with me. It wouldn't even matter if she loved me back. She would be welcome to steal all the potions she wanted from me if I was able to touch her each time she took one. In fact, I would encourage her to take them if I got to pat her down and find them each time.

I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to wander, conjuring up scene after scene of what might be possible with Alia if she loved me back. We would go on picnics the way other happy couples did. I could take her to the seaside so we could swim and bask in the sun. There would be late nights reading together with her curled up beside me in bed. Then just before we went to sleep, she would lean over and kiss me, or else whisper that she loved me.

My eyes flew open. If I continued thinking those thoughts, I would lose any shred of self-control I still had left. Instead, I tried to focus on my breathing, pulling air into my lungs in slow, steady streams that took the edge off the intensity of my thoughts. My exhales set the book's pages to

rustling, and I slowly lowered it to find Alia lifting the jacket and watching me.

If only I could shrivel up and disappear.

"Go ahead and laugh," I grumbled. "I know you want to."

"No, I don't." Her voice still had that softer, more feminine quality to it from a few minutes earlier.

Great, she had to pick *now* to start being kind and patient? I needed reasons to hate her, not more evidence as to why she would be the perfect woman for me. I held the book back up and plastered it against my face. "I've never been so humiliated in my entire life."

There was a slight noise as she came out from under the jacket and crossed the room. "Hey, there's nothing humiliating about this. Like I told you, it's just the potion talking, and you showing this much restraint when you've been double-dosed is genuinely commendable. I wish other men had even half the strength of character you've exhibited. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

How desperately I wanted to believe her.

For once, her smile was an understanding one. "Look, should I have been embarrassed that I regained consciousness after you gave me that blood-replenishing potion?"

"It's not the same."

"It is, though. Both were simple physical reactions to an elixir designed for a specific purpose. If you're embarrassed by this, then I should have been embarrassed by the blood-replenishing potion working when I needed it to. These feelings are just a testament to how excellent an alchemist you are."

She was so beautiful. Loose curls hung down to frame her face, and her eyes were so vividly blue. I could look forever and never grow tired of the sight.

"You're being kind," I told her. I didn't deserve her forgiveness or empathy. She would be repulsed by me if she was able to examine my actual thoughts. She would see me like she saw Rahil—possessive, and jealous.

She stood. "When I'm not busy being a venomous viper or plotting to murder my ex-husband, I'm actually a very kind person."

I ran a hand down my face. As long as she didn't touch me, I would be able to manage. "You can mock me if it helps. I deserve it."

"No. You deserve to be complimented, not criticized. It was an uncomfortable situation and you willingly took it on for science. I admire you for that."

She reached out and touched my shoulder.

All my self-control broke. I needed to kiss Alia, and I needed to do it *now*. Without even realizing I'd moved, I stood and caught her wrist. The moment I touched her, I realized I'd made a catastrophic mistake. My study dissolved so it was just her and me, alone together with no distractions, nothing to come between us.

She was so soft. I couldn't stop touching her. Her very presence was more addicting than the most potent potion. Why hadn't I realized just how much I loved her before this moment? She mattered more to me than anything else in the entire world. I would sacrifice anything if it meant one more second with her.

I slid my hand up to hold the back of her head. All I needed now was to move in just one more inch. Alia's hand pushed against my chest but I moved forward anyway, driven beyond what I could resist. If I didn't kiss her right this very second, the world would cease to exist and the sun would vanish. But just as I moved forward, she retreated at the same pace.

Alia said something, but the only thing going through my head was a rushing, roaring sound that blocked out all else. I inclined my head.

"I need you," I whispered in a strangled voice as I tightened my hold on her. "You know you belong with me." I was going to marry this woman. If I accomplished nothing else in my life but being with her, my life would still be complete.

I dipped my head toward her but she turned her head so my mouth found her cheek instead of her lips.

"You... you aren't yourself," she said. "Remember, this is the potion talking, not you."

She didn't want me to kiss her. For a moment, I didn't care, but then I caught a glimpse of the fear in her eyes. She likely had looked at Rahil that same way, begging him to control himself and not hurt her. Reason caught up with me but I couldn't prevent my thumb dragging along her neck.

Flaming phoenixes, she felt so good.

Everything in me wanted me to just kiss her, but I mustn't. I wasn't strong enough to maintain control on my own.

I swallowed hard then forced out the words I knew I had to say. "Alia, I'm begging you—get away from me. I'm not sure how much longer I can hold myself back. Lock yourself in the washroom."

The moment I let go of her, she fled.

So that was it.

She didn't want me after all.

If only I had a genie with me now, I'd wish to have her love me.