



Ballad for Jasmine Town

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BALLAD
FOR
JASMINE
TOWN

MOLLY RINGLE



2024

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Mild: consensual sexual activity, self-harm thoughts, drowning, nonconsensual sexual activity (mentioned, not shown), child abuse (mentioned, not shown)

Moderate: classism/discrimination against groups, violence (physical), natural disaster, mass destruction, trauma, torture, swearing, murder (attempted), death and grief

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EIDOLONIA WIKI

This page is part of the Eidolonian Intranet: protected by fae spells and certified Unhackable Crosswater by Eidolonian witches. Welcome!

Eidolonia

Eidolonia is an island country in the north Pacific Ocean, consisting of one large main landmass and more than one hundred smaller islands. Only about one-sixth of this area is inhabited by humans, nearly all of it along the main island's coast, the rest being fae territory.

The country has no close neighbors, lying roughly equidistant from Hawaii, the Aleutian Islands, and Japan. Its climate is temperate, but weather can depend on the whims of regional fae. Eidolonia is a constitutional monarchy, with a royal family as well as a prime minister and other democratically elected officials.

Eidolonia was entirely fae territory until the early 1700s, when the fae allowed a few sailors from various countries to find the island. They permitted a limited number of additional human immigrants over ensuing years, making deals to allow human settlements, which gradually grew to encompass the entire coastline. Eidolonia is undetectable to outsiders (*crosswaters*) due to concealment spells maintained by the fae, and humans who leave the island will not remember it, with false memories taking its place, unless they carry a memory charm that preserves their knowledge of the country.

An estimated two-thirds of Eidolonian humans have some fae ancestry due to intermixing. Approximately half of humans on Eidolonia, regardless of ancestry, are born with witch abilities, being *matter-witches* (able to manipulate inanimate matter), *exo-witches* (able to manipulate other living things), or *endo-witches* (able to manipulate their own forms). Being more than one type is rare but is occasionally documented. The magical powers of the fae, in nearly all cases, are stronger than those of witches.

Each individual of mixed background is either *counted human* or *counted fae*. This is an innate and unchangeable feature. Being counted human means being mortal and having limited magical power. Being counted fae means possessing greater power and being immortal, though nearly all fae choose to regenerate into a new form after many centuries of life.

Wanderers, humans who live primarily in the fae realm and are not on record as citizens, are thought to be rare, though tallying their numbers (or that of the fae population) is essentially impossible.

The *verge*, the border between fae and human territory, underwent select alterations in 2020 to revert certain parcels of land to fae territory (for example, see *Miryoku*) but otherwise has not changed since its previous adjustment in 1799, in accordance with the Prince Larkin Treaty. This truce also put an end to the only fae-human war in Eidolonia. The fire faery Ula Kana, who led the attacks, was captured by an alliance of humans and fae and put into an enchanted sleep along with Prince Larkin of the Eidolonian royal family, a deal brokered by court sorcerer Rosamund Highvalley.

Since then, occasional crime between fae and humans has still occurred, but at a low rate. Entering fae territory, however, remains significantly dangerous for humans.

Miryoku

Miryoku was a small city (population 20,816) on the Southwest Peninsula of Eidolonia. It was founded in 1762 by human settlers from Asia and was situated unusually close to the verge, its easternmost boundary just under 100 ft away in places.

On March 21, 2020, upon the awakening of Prince Larkin and Ula Kana, and the subsequent destruction instigated by the latter, Miryoku was invaded by fae and almost entirely destroyed. While most residents were able to flee, nine were killed, another six went missing and have been presumed dead, and as many as two hundred suffered enchantment damage, including one who was permanently transfigured. After the restoration of peace, the verge was redrawn around the former town. The majority of Miryoku in its original form no longer exists, having been overgrown by the fae forest.

CHAPTER I

MIRYOKU - MAY 2018

AN ORANGE FLAME GLIMMERED BETWEEN branches, a flare in the night. From the back seat of the van, Rafi leaned forward to look, his smile vanishing.

“Is that a will-o’-the-wisp hanging out in our garden?” Izzy asked, steering into the drive. Gravel crunched under the tires.

“Yes.” Rafi’s eyes stayed on the figure. “I know him. He’s from Kepelo’s haunt.”

“If he’s come to fetch you, let us know before taking off,” Tash said. She brushed the tip of her green braid lazily against her palm. “We’ll need to find a replacement for you.”

Rafi himself was a replacement, standing in for the band’s regular mandolinist, who was out of town investigating a new job. Or something like that. Rafi tended to be hazy on human-world details.

Izzy parked the van, and Rafi slid the side door open and jogged to the garden. He’d been gone all day with the band, on a trip to Dasdemir to play at a festival. If Figo, the will-o’-the-wisp, was seeking him, he could have been waiting hours.

Ignoring the couch on Jove and Izzy’s porch, Figo sat atop an azalea shrub. Or hovered, really. He put no weight on it; its branches didn’t even bend. His two skinny arms were crossed in reverie, his four insectlike legs folded beneath him. At the moment, he was about a quarter the size of Rafi or any average human, and his long body was multisectioned like a caterpillar. His bottom half glowed.

In his wide-set eyes and small mouth, Rafi read pity. His body turned cold.

“Figo. What are you doing here?”

“Akurafi.” Figo unfolded his arms, as well as his oval wings. “You must come to the haunt.”

“Why?”

“Someone awaits you there. A ghost.”

Rafi blinked. “Whose?” His mind flipped through the short list of humans who might seek him if—if they died...

“Your grandmother. Hazel.”

The breath skittered out between Rafi’s lips.

But he’d seen her just last week.

But she was doing fine.

But he didn’t have, or at least know, any other human relatives and therefore *it couldn’t be her*. He couldn’t bear that.

Ever since Rafi could remember, Figo had been one of the many who’d brought him fire-roasted meats and apples (or forgot to), laughed at his childhood babbles and songs, and shrugged off his adolescent furies and advised him not to care so much. Now he looked solemn. Tonight’s news evidently saddened even a blithe will-o’-the-wisp.

“What happened?” Rafi managed to ask, his throat tight.

“She will tell you. Come.”

Rafi flared his magic, heat streaking through him, then remembered he should undress first so his clothes wouldn’t rip. He paused to yank off his shirt and scabbled at the tie on his sarong. Then he pivoted. He needed to tell the band—Tash had just said—

She stood nearby, her eyes grave for once rather than narrowed in a smirk. “I heard,” she said. “I’ll tell Jove and Izzy. Go.”

Rafi nodded. He flung off his clothes and let his fire flare. His shape changed: broader shoulders, shorter arms, nails becoming claws. He grew wings, a tapering tail, a snout. An orange glow rippled under his skin. He hooked the sarong with one claw and flicked it around his neck like a scarf—it would do for clothes once he got there. Then he shot off across the garden, Figo gliding in flight alongside him.

Despite his wings, Rafi couldn’t actually fly, and though he sped through the night faster than his human legs could carry him, he couldn’t reach the speed of his fire-fae relatives.

Still, faster was better. He needed to see his grandmother. Ghosts seldom stayed long.

They swooped across the public footpath, then into the forest. When they reached the land adjacent to fire fae territory, they shot across the verge in a crackle of electricity and arrived in Kepelo's haunt.

Warmth and a smoky, floral scent enveloped Rafi. He changed back to human form to preserve energy and tied the sarong around his waist. Bare-foot, he walked with Figo along a path between boulders and scrubby trees. Clumps of purple catmint flowers spilled from cracks in rocks. Flames sparkled everywhere: lanterns in trees, bonfires on the ground, sparks dancing in the air. He tried to take comfort from the familiarity of the surroundings, but terror clouded his mind.

Like most fae, Figo couldn't lie. Which meant Hazel truly was dead. Even so, Rafi couldn't quite believe it until he got to his mother's cave.

There Hazel stood—vigorous thatch of short white hair, thin frame, daisy-patterned blue shawl. But now, when Rafi reached out, his trembling fingers slipped through her translucent shoulder and touched nothing but cool air.

A lump blocked his throat. "Lao Lao?"

"Hello, Rafi. I'm so glad you came." She smiled, looking sympathetic but not particularly sad.

"What happened?"

"A stroke." Hazel's voice wavered as if distorted by water. "I don't think I'll make a very good ghost. I don't plan to stay long as one. But I had to talk to you before I left. It's easier to make myself visible in the fae realm, that's why I came here."

"Yeah, I've...only ever seen ghosts on this side." His tongue felt numb.

Those ghosts he'd seen in the past had unsettled him enough. They'd been a rare occurrence, and never anyone he knew well.

"I told the human investigators, once she explained the story to me," Kepelo said, her voice full and warm compared to the wateriness of Hazel's. "But they say there isn't much they can do."

Tonight, rather than embodying her full form as a twenty-foot-high drake, Kepelo was in human shape, albeit a tall human with gossamer red wings and shining scales in lieu of clothes.

"Much they can do about what?" Rafi asked.

“The korreds,” Hazel said. “I was out for a walk on the footpath a few days ago. Or perhaps yesterday. Hard to say with the time difference. A korred came up to me.”

Already Rafi felt sick with horror.

“He was very polite,” Hazel continued. “He wanted me to come to his haunt for a bit, to tell stories. ‘Like the ones you used to tell Rafi,’ he said. ‘He doesn’t come around much anymore.’”

“Of course I don’t. Not when they—” He made himself stop. “What did they do?”

“Naturally I wouldn’t have gone. I know better. But I think he must have enchanted me, because I found I was walking into the woods with him. We went into his haunt, and all the korreds were there, gathered around. They were nice to me, Rafi, really. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

He had no words. She was dead. There was no wrong idea to get.

“They sat me down and I told stories. Then I got tired and couldn’t think of any more. They offered me tea. From the human realm, they promised. And, well, the tea may have been from the human realm. But the water they made it with probably wasn’t. Neither was the wooden cup they served it in.”

Rafi shut his eyes a moment.

“I had a stroke,” she concluded. “It was fast. I don’t remember much about it. Then I found myself like this, and they told me they were sorry for it, and they brought my body back to the path for people to find.”

Rafi’s lungs shuddered as he dragged air into them. He turned to his mother. “Tell me you’ve done something.”

“Certainly,” she said. “I wouldn’t ignore the death of my mother through their influence, even if unintentional. I went to Brogyo’s haunt and demanded recompense. He agreed, and one of his high-ranking folk volunteered to return to the elements.”

“An ancient and bored one,” Figo grumbled. “Who would have done so before long anyway.”

“Even so,” she said, “they’ve been reminded they cannot do such things to people close to me without losing one of their own.”

“But that’s not enough,” Rafi said. “That’s nowhere near enough.”

“What would you prefer?” Kepelo asked. “What vengeance would you

take that would improve things?”

“Not vengeance. A...stronger deal. Punishment if they enchant *any* mortals on the human side of the verge, ever. Even if the person survives.”

“Impossible.” Kepelo’s calmness maddened him. Her being counted as fae, even with half-human ancestry, often made worlds of difference in her reactions to things that devastated Rafi. “The other fae already chafe at the deal that protects you,” she said. “They would never agree to a deal reaching so far and covering so many.”

“The one protecting you is the important one,” Hazel added. “You’re young yet, darling. You have so much time ahead of you.”

Tears stung his eyes. After tonight he’d never again hear her call him “darling,” nor anything else.

He swallowed. “The human government, the police—they should care. Lao Lao’s a citizen.”

Was, his mind corrected.

“It broke no laws of theirs,” Kepelo said. “Fae actions are outside their control. They can’t do anything, and trying to retaliate would be ill-advised.”

Rafi knew that. He just desperately wished it were otherwise. “This isn’t the first time. The things they’ve done...”

“We can’t change what’s happened,” Kepelo said. “I’m grieved, too, Rafi. She was my mother.”

Who you never lived with and hardly ever saw, Rafi thought. He’d spent more time with Hazel than Kepelo had. Kepelo’s “grief” was nothing more than a traditional gesture of honor paid to one’s forebears. Or perhaps he was just heartbroken and furious, and willing to think ungenerous things about everyone.

He wiped his eyes. “I’m going to them.”

“No, dear,” Hazel said. “Don’t put yourself in danger.”

“It won’t do any good,” Kepelo added.

“You think I could *not* go to them, after this? Do you think *Broggyo* would ignore it and say nothing if we took away someone important to him?”

“I hardly need point out,” his mother said, “that your powers and Broggyo’s are not equal.”

He laughed, swift and bitter. “No. Because if they were...”

No point finishing that thought. *Not vengeance*, he had said.

But if he had his mother's powers, if he could become vast and made of flame rather than just flesh with a flamelike glow to it, if he had the loyalty of drakes and djinns to command...

Driving out the korreds and reducing their cool, redwood-shaded haunt to a stretch of smoking char wouldn't bring Hazel back to life. It *might* serve as a deterrent to other fae. Or it might only turn them all against him and spark dreadful retaliation.

All a fantasy anyway. He couldn't do it, and his mother wouldn't.

He turned to Hazel. "How long can you stay?"

"Until dawn." She spoke with calm certainty. Just something she knew now.

"Talk to me until then?"

Figo withdrew, leaving grandmother, mother, and son together. They sat in front of the cave, its majestic mouth open to the stars. Hazel spoke of things she had told them long ago, relating the details one last time. The brief affair in her youth with the drake in human form, whom she met at a festival, leaving her pregnant with Kepelo. Hazel's bitterness when she saw him later, at other festivals, kissing new lovers. Her greatest heartbreak, when her baby girl was born and the attending fae midwife assessed Kepelo and found she was counted fae—immortal and mighty—and therefore had to be given up to their realm. Hazel's healing over the ensuing years, both helped and slowed by the sporadic meetings with Kepelo.

"You were suddenly so grown up," Hazel said to Kepelo. "Your infancy, it just didn't happen."

"Of course I was an infant," Kepelo said, dignified. "I was an infant in the way that fae are."

"Which is nothing like a human infant, as you well know. Then you, Rafi. A new baby girl—or so we thought! Changing yourself over the years with your wonderful magic to show your true self. Kepelo, he's the finest gift you could have given me. Even if I only had him on the occasional visits."

"It's through my selfishness that you didn't have him more," Kepelo said. "I blame my human half for such unreasonable sentiment."

"By which you mean you blame me." Hazel laughed as she said it.

Finally Rafi asked his mother, “Could I talk to her alone?”

Rising, Kepelo nodded. “My heart is full with the gifts of reminiscence you have given me tonight, my mother.” She extended her webbed red wings and bowed. “Through my child and me you shall be remembered, and through the elements and the Spirit you will live on.”

Hazel rose, too, and bowed in response. “You are wondrous, my child. To have any part in the creation of such a being is more honor than most mortals will ever know.” Though her tribute was fae-style in its wording, Hazel delivered it like a human, with sentimental pride.

Kepelo’s wings carried her in an upward spiral into the night.

Dawn was seeping into the dark, black lightening to blue.

“Did you ever resent her for it?” Rafi asked Hazel. “Keeping me here, when I could have been with you all those years?”

“Oh, certainly. I was so bitter, Rafi! But by the time I even knew about you, you were already walking and talking.”

“I’ve been thinking about it, now that I’m spending more time in town. And I can’t believe she chose that. It’s like she wasn’t even thinking of you. Or of me. Just herself, and—and what entertainment I could provide.”

“Keeping you did give her a unique appeal. Between that and her father’s position, I expect it cemented her place as ruler when he returned to the elements. But *you’re* unique, too, you know. Oh, of course, everyone is. You have opportunities, though, that you wouldn’t if you’d grown up on the human side.”

It was a complex enough subject to discuss for days. But they only had minutes, and it was a moot point. His childhood was long since over.

“I suppose it would have been a lot to ask,” he said. “To take on a child by yourself.”

“True. I was getting old. But I would have done it in a heartbeat, if she’d offered.”

“I just wanted you to know I would have liked that. A calm town life, with you.”

She reached out a transparent palm and cupped his face, cooling the tears that had spilled down his cheek. “Few lives are truly calm. And yours, Akurafi? You’re made of fire, stone, and human passion. I think it would be

going against your nature to hope for a calm life.”

“I don’t really know,” he said, his voice broken, “what kind I’m supposed to have.”

“You have reason for wanting vengeance. But don’t let that guide you. Follow your love instead.”

Who, or what, is my love, now that you’re gone?, he wanted to ask. But his voice refused to work anymore, and she couldn’t have told him anyway. Ghosts didn’t know the future.

“And I,” Hazel added, “have a path to follow.” She gazed past him. He saw nothing but tumbled boulders awash with firelight. Only patches of her figure were visible now, shredding into ribbons.

His heart clutched. “Lao Lao.”

“It’s so lovely, Rafi. It’s just how the footpath looked in spring, when I was a little girl. We’d go out at dawn on the first morning of Lady Festival. You could walk barefoot on the moss. It was so soft. Jasmine grew overhead, just like that. Ah, that sweet smell.”

He saw no jasmine, and all he could smell was the mineral ash of the fae’s flames and the tang of the tears clogging his nose. He tried to touch her shoulder, but his hand slipped through.

The joy on her face shone like starlight. “There’s more yet, dear. For me and for you.”

“Come see me again. Please, Lao Lao. Or—send a message. Whatever you can.”

“The message will always be that I love you, and I want you to seek your happiness.”

“I love you too. I won’t say goodbye,” he insisted. “Not if there’s more for us both.”

She kissed her fingers and held them to his face. “All your sides can play together in harmony. Remember.”

She rose and floated toward the invisible path.

Tears blurred Rafi’s vision. He blinked them away as the last wisp of blue daisy shawl swirled into nothing.

CHAPTER 2

DO *not* GO TO THE KORREDS,” KEPELO warned once more before he stormed out of her haunt.

He should have listened.

The border to the korreds’ haunt was an impenetrable wall of boulders, tree trunks, and razor-thorned vines with one path through, which Mukut currently blocked. She was in the form that best served her for this purpose: a slab of rock ten feet wide and equally high. Mukut was a stone giant and easily kept intruders out just by blocking their path—or thumping her weight down on them if necessary. That was rare, though. Of all the earth fae who lived in Brogyo’s haunt, she was one of the gentlest.

When Rafi approached, Mukut’s three stone-shingle eyelids lifted with a scraping sound. She made a rumble, its tone suggesting sorrow.

“You heard, then,” Rafi said wearily. “Let me in, please.”

People who were counted as human—mortal, with limited abilities—weren’t physically able to hear all the sounds in the fae language, let alone make them. So despite Rafi having grown up in the fae realm, he had only a partial understanding of the language. The speech of some fae, like Mukut, was almost entirely unintelligible to him. All he could glean was the general mood of it. He only knew Mukut’s name because other fae had told him.

Four stone blocks elongated from the slab and reached for him, taking vaguely handlike shape. They settled on his arms.

“*No one* thinks I should go in. But they can’t hurt me any more than they already have. I’ll go over the top if I have to, but I’m tired, Mukut. Please don’t make me.”

In his drakelike form he could skitter over her, too fast for her to catch. It had been a game when he was younger, one of the few things he had enjoyed doing in the korreds’ haunt.

Mukut grumbled but retracted her stone arms. She slid aside.

“Thank you.” He stepped onto the path.

Damp air bathed him, smelling of rock, vines, and decaying leaves. The light was greenish, seeping from glow-worms and luminescent fae in the forms of tree frogs, snakes, and banana-sized yellow slugs.

The cool air was one of the only other things he liked about his father’s haunt. Kepelo’s territory was always hot.

Rafi had long wished his father could have been just about any other type of earth fae, stone giants included. Dryads, hobs, gnomes, even hunters with their daunting antlers would all have been likelier to possess some modicum of kindness. Korreds, though, were folk of the mountain stones, cunning and tough, with about as much tenderness as any average rock.

When he reached the clearing, a dozen korreds converged around him, screeching his name in greeting. It had been many seasons since he was last here, but this was how they always behaved when he arrived. As was the next part.

“What do you bring?”

“Do you bring stories?”

“Do you bring pets?”

“Do you bring food?”

“Do you bring friends?”

Their hard hands pawed at him, clutched his sarong, tugged his hair. The korreds were shorter than him by a head, in their usual at-home form. But the strength of any one of them was like a tree and a gorilla combined.

He swatted them away, flaring his fire. It couldn’t hurt them, but they pulled back, laughing.

“I bring you a warning,” he said, “and that’s it. Where are Sminu and Brogyo?”

“Here, stinky child.”

He turned. Brogyo, ruler of the korred haunt, strode out from the darkness on his bandy legs. Sminu—Rafi’s father and Brogyo’s second-in-charge—walked a step behind.

Every korred was green-gray and looked like a human made of rocks and gnarled branches. Their bodies and faces were as mobile as any animal’s, though, and both Brogyo and Sminu leered as they beheld Rafi.

“A warning?” Sminu said. “Do we hear the child correctly?”

Rafi stared at his father. “Was it you who brought Hazel here?”

“Not me. I wouldn’t lower myself to such a menial errand.”

Rafi surged forward, furious. An oak branch smacked him backward. It bruised his ribs and punched his breath out, then twisted up to its proper position in the tree again. On the ground, Rafi splayed a hand across his chest, channeling magic into opening his lungs so he could stop gasping like a landed fish.

Brogyo flicked his fingers, and the oak bumped Rafi’s rear from beneath with one of its roots, then fell still. “I sent our folk out to find us some entertainment,” he told Rafi. “It was merely good luck one of them encountered your grandmother taking her walk.”

His voice was deep and resonant. Rafi had heard humans call it “sexy” when Brogyo took human form and crossed the verge to mingle with them. The remark always made him feel ill.

“Who?” Rafi asked, low. His breath still came short. “Who took her?”

“Oxlock.” Brogyo nodded across the clearing. “Not that it matters. She would have interested any of ours.”

Clambering to his feet, Rafi glared at Oxlock, one of the essentially interchangeable korreds who did Brogyo’s bidding.

Oxlock stared back, impassive, then bared his teeth in a grin. “She told me herself! ‘A korred,’ she said. ‘Then you know my grandson, Rafi.’ We all remember your stories, Rafi, the ones she gave you. I knew Brogyo and everyone would love it if we could have her.”

“You can’t *have* her. And now she’s gone—because you brought her here.”

“We didn’t mean to.” Oxlock’s voice became a whine. “We wanted her to live longer.”

“People usually survive,” Brogyo cajoled. “It isn’t our fault some are so fragile. Besides, the stories, Akurafi. You know we loved those. We needed them again.”

“The goat who climbs to the clouds and makes it rain milk!” someone chimed in.

“The merfolk who make the water rise up over Miryoku, and everyone grows gills, and it becomes a water town,” another said.

“The trees who stretch their roots and branches all through the buildings so Miryoku becomes an earth fae town—ruled by us!” someone else said. That got the loudest cheers.

Rafi flinched. Those were all stories he, not Hazel, had made up, tales inspired by features he loved about the human side when visiting. The flavor of goat cheese. The footbridges and waterfront paths. The fragrant greenery woven among Miryoku’s buildings and streets—“Jasmine Town,” some called it.

“Stop going across and enchanting people.” He separated the words clearly.

The korreds laughed. The fact that their laughter sounded more genial than malicious just added to the night’s horror.

“You cannot set such a rule,” Brogyo reminded him. “It’s the fae’s island. Humans live on it at our sufferance, because they amuse us.”

“They would amuse you much more willingly if you didn’t hurt them. Keep acting this way and no one will want to come near you.”

“What does it matter if their cooperation is willing? We can *make* them willing.”

Letting such remarks pass unchallenged had become a survival skill for Rafi. Years had spooled by, in fact, since the last time he’d stood his ground against them, let alone attacked back.

He’d already been knocked down by one tree branch tonight, and he was weaving on his feet from weariness. Turning around and walking out of the haunt would be the wise thing to do.

He nodded, smoothed his tangled hair out of his face, and lunged at Brogyo in a flash of fire.

It couldn’t have been more than two minutes before they dumped him outside the haunt border.

“You’re not beyond healing,” Brogyo assured, crouching beside him. “No deals broken—just a few bones.” He laughed, then his tone became earnest. “Rafi, listen. Once you’re no longer angry, do bring someone back for us. At least some stories. We’re family, after all. Right, Sminu?”

Sminu gave a sour smile. “Yet it would be so much better if he’d behave like a properly loyal child.”

Rafi would have pointed out he was no longer any kind of child, but his mouth was full of blood and he was having trouble breathing. At least two

teeth were loosened. They'd broken some ribs, too, and many of the bones in one foot. He didn't answer.

Brogyo thumped him on the shoulder, then strolled away. His korreds fell in step behind him.

Rafi lay on his side on the redwood needles. He tried sending self-healing to the worst bone breaks, but his energy was depleted.

A rumble vibrated in the earth. An expanse of stone, heavy but gentle, settled along his back. Magic zinged through him, making him shiver and sweat, but it left relief in its wake. His loosened teeth resecured themselves, and the broken bones eased from agony to mere ache. They'd take time to heal fully, but at least he could speak again.

"Thank you, Mukut." He planted a hand on the ground and raised himself, shaking. He spat out the blood and leaned back on her stone arm. She rumbled again. "Yeah," he agreed. "You were right. Shouldn't have gone in there."

His injured foot still hurt, but he limped to the creek and turned to make his way along it, back toward the verge.

Before he got more than a few steps, the water bubbled up in the center. The top of Tash's head emerged. She was in fish form, but as she shot to the bank in one graceful tail-flip, she transformed. She reached up with human arms to hoist herself onto the bank, and her tail divided into legs. She shook off the water and stood before him, green-haired and sequin-clad.

"Let me guess," she said. "You went after the korreds."

Rafi nodded, hand cradling his ribs. "You heard?"

"It's been three days out there. Jove and Izzy were getting all parental and worried, so I crossed the verge to ask around."

"Jove and Izzy, huh. Definitely not you."

"I care because we can use you for gigs. All right, idiot, this way." She wrapped an arm around his waist and steered him into the water. "Come see my people."



"Where to?" Tash asked.

Rafi had awoken from the healing sleep induced by the shellycoats, Tash's

people, and had eaten some food they'd brought—wild cress, snails, and the tart oranges that grew near the fire fae haunt. All of it had come from just outside the verge. Fae-realm food could hurt Rafi, but at least someone was likely to save him from the enchantment before he died. A courtesy not extended to his grandmother.

He pulled apart an orange numbly. "Where to," he echoed.

Most often he slept in Kepelo's haunt, in a hammock between boulders. It wasn't as comfortable or quiet as the couch in Hazel's house, where he had stayed as a child on his visits. But Hazel had sold that house years ago when she'd moved into the home for elders. Occasionally he'd spent nights in the korreds' haunt—out of their way, among the ancient trees near the border. He had even slept outdoors in the human realm now and then, nestled among driftwood at the seashore, or lying in a peaceful meadow near Miryoku.

None of those options appealed today. His mother's was the closest remaining thing to home—"home" was a notion he didn't ponder much and wasn't even sure he understood—but Kepelo's aloofness repelled him. He wanted to rage and grieve, and he wanted people who would rage and grieve along with him. But there wasn't anyone. Hazel's human friends were surely mourning her, but he barely knew them.

He had no place in the human realm, and the fae realm had killed Hazel. There was nowhere to go. He stared at the river, mute.

"Okay," Tash said. "You want to just sit here?"

He shook his head after a moment.

"Do you think you can still play music, at least?" she said, sounding a bit exasperated.

A glimmer of appeal tugged at the edge of his dark mood. Not that playing music solved the question of where to sleep for the next several nights, but since she asked, he nodded. At least it was something to do.

Tash pulled him to his feet. "Then come on."

Jove and Izzy did look parental in their worry, Rafi noted when they opened their door. Not that Rafi knew such concern from his own parents, but he'd seen that anxiety on Jove's and Izzy's faces when they fretted about their teenage daughter.

It had now been a week on the human side since he'd last seen the band.

It hadn't occurred to him that he could matter enough for them to worry.

"Shit, Rafi." Izzy hugged him. She smelled like sandalwood incense and bread dough.

Jove's large hand settled on Rafi's back. "Fucking awful. Such bullshit."

"At least I have the liuqin," Rafi said. "The one thing of hers I'd want. I'm just...not sure what to do now."

"Come in here." Izzy hooked him by the arm and led him into the practice room. Jove and Tash followed. The house was over a century old, passed down by Izzy's family, and this was one of four ground-floor rooms that faced the interior square courtyard. Aside from the practice room, the courtyard was the only other space in which Rafi had spent much time—the band sometimes practiced there on warm days.

Twenty-four songs were written in green marker on the room's whiteboard.

"How many of these do you know?" Izzy asked.

Rafi scanned the list. "Four, if you mean music and lyrics both. I could probably do the chords for...seven or eight others? I'd have to look up the rest."

"Then how about you stay here for the summer and learn them. And any other songs we need. Rent is free as long as you play gigs, but I'm warning you, there may be a lot of them. Summer's our busy season."

"I'd stay here?" Rafi's gaze moved to the olive-colored couch by the wall, then across the courtyard to rooms he'd never entered.

"Garden cottage, we were thinking," Jove said. "Give you more privacy. There's a room upstairs you could have if you prefer, but it's small and gets hot as Hades in the summer."

"Yes," Rafi said, stunned. "The cottage—of course, that'd be fine. Thank you. So, gigs, the whole summer?"

"Timing being funny like it is," Jove said, "Tom told us a couple days ago that he's taking that job in Amanecer. So that puts us out one mandolin player. Want to sub in for a while? Maybe long haul if it works out?"

Rafi's eyes welled with tears again. *Thank you, Lao Lao.*

He couldn't prove she had anything to do with this gift, but she had always liked to repeat the saying about how the Spirit moved unseen like

groundwater, springing up as a fountain to replenish us in our thirst when we least expected it.

“Also,” Izzy said, “for a little extra money, there are other jobs we sometimes take. We were thinking you’d be especially useful for them. If you’re interested.”

Rafi looked at Tash, who leaned on the wall like a long water-lily stem. He’d encountered her in the fae realm on occasion, asking oddly specific questions, tracking down items or animals or people, sometimes bringing a human along—a willing human, unlike those the korreds nabbed.

He’d assumed she’d taken on those deals herself. Seemed there was more to the story.

“Yeah,” he said. “Tell me what I can do.”

CHAPTER 3

THE THUMPING BASS LINE AND CATCHY CHORUS of Pulp's "Common People" led Roxana Wei down the footpath toward the concert. Although it was a considerably more stripped-down version than the original, the song took her back to high school, when it had been new and popular.

Her daughter, Ester, likely wouldn't experience high school in Miryoku. The thought set off a tender pang in Roxana's chest. Gods, everything did lately. She had to stop looking at each sunrise, each take-out banh mi, each conversation with a neighbor, as if it was the last in her life. She and Ester were moving, not dying.

Gold and purple lights gleamed through the redwood branches. Moss and needles crunched under her sandals, their scents heavy in the humid air. The audience came into view, heads and arms bounding up and down as they shouted along with the words.

Entering the clearing, Roxana passed a bulletin board with a poster stapled to it, splashed with neon paint and black hand lettering.

Meloncollie, June 29, 8:30 p.m., Gusu Park. FREE. The '90s mangled lovingly, SWP style!

Eidolonia's southwest peninsula, or SWP, couldn't claim the music scene of Dasdemir, the capital; nor even of Port Baleia in the north; but it embraced what it had. Which included Meloncollie, Ester's favorite local group, a nineties cover band.

Whiffs of perfume, sweat, and weed met Roxana's nose as she sauntered around the crowd. She spotted her mother, Amaris, sitting on a blanket and talking to a neighbor. Ester was in the throng in front of the stage, bouncing as she chatted with two other kids. She waved at Roxana, then went on talking. Roxana waved back and continued to wander.

"Common People" ended, and the band swung into Soul Asylum's "Run-

away Train.”

Meloncollie had four musicians: two humans and two fae, according to Ester. Not that it was easy to tell the difference on sight. In tonight’s heat, all of them wore sleeveless tops and sarong-style skirts.

The petite drummer with dreadlocks was Izzy Prior, a human citizen—Roxana knew her from around town. The bassist with long golden-green hair and a matching shimmery skirt was likely a faery. The guitarist in front, who looked like a cross between Lenny Kravitz and Prince, was Jove de Vera, Izzy’s spouse. So the musician nearest Roxana, as she wandered toward the stage, was probably fae.

He had a black ponytail, and gold glitter surrounded his eyes. His bare arms and legs gleamed with scales, flashing red and gold. He wore a dark red vest, hanging open, and a black sarong patterned with silver moons and stars. His feet were bare, and he was playing a mandolin.

No—she studied it closer—not a mandolin. One of the Asian string instruments. A pipa, perhaps. She figured she ought to know, since, like many SWP folk, she possessed a fair amount of Asian ancestry. But in terms of personal music experience, she’d never gotten beyond a few ukulele chords herself.

The strings were metal, judging from their gleam. She moved closer, arms folded to keep her elbows from colliding with others. Instrument strings were often steel, but not if the musician was fae or even half-fae—they couldn’t abide touching iron, and steel was mostly iron. Brass, then? Bronze? Nickel?

Engrossed, she stared at the strings for at least a full verse and chorus. Then she lifted her gaze, and a jolt shot through her. The musician’s eyes were on her, dark and shining among the glitter. He smiled wryly.

Her face went hot. She smiled back, abashed, then spent the rest of the song casually wandering farther from the stage.

The concert ended around ten o’clock. The noise settled down to conversational babble, and folk began strolling home. Park attendants jumped on stage to help the band pack up.

Roxana’s ears rang as she returned to the blanket where Ester now sat with Amaris.

“Ready?” Roxana said.

“Yes!” Ester leaped up.

Amaris rose, too, but then someone called, “Mayor Wei!”

“Hey, Hari,” Amaris said.

Hari strolled up, wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt advertising his dessert café, Mochi Coco, its lettering barely visible under his bushy gray beard. “Listen, we got to talk about those pipevine fae. Twice this week I haven’t been able to get my shop door open because they grew the vines so fast overnight. It’s the same with the places next door, and the apartment windows upstairs.”

Roxana linked her arm into her mother’s. “I apologize, Hari, but I need to borrow my mom. We have to talk to the band about an event.”

Amaris patted her hand and released it. “You and Ester go. I’ll catch up.”

Roxana glanced at Ester, who shrugged. “Okay,” Roxana said. “Night, Hari.”

“Night, folks!” Hari swung back to Amaris, lifting his hands into debate pose. “Now, we’ve tried the deals we talked about...”

Roxana and Ester crossed the trampled grass to the stage.

“Poor Nan,” Ester said. “People are always doing that to her when we go out.”

“She claims she likes it. *I* wouldn’t want her job, myself.”

“Me neither.” Ester brightened as Izzy and Jove came out beside the stage, wiping their faces with towels. “There they are.” She hauled Roxana forward.

Izzy greeted them with a smile that widened as she realized who she was talking to. “The mayor’s daughter and granddaughter! Of course. I’ve seen you folks around.”

They got onto the band’s summer schedule within minutes. “Ester and Roxana Wei, going-away party, August thirty-first, eight p.m., Ti Falls Park.” Izzy typed it in on her phone’s calendar.

“We’ll email you the paperwork as soon as we get home,” Jove said.

“Thank you!” Ester gushed.

“Just sorry you’re moving,” Izzy said. “But Port Baleia’s a cool city.”

Roxana glanced toward the band’s van. A park attendant was shutting its doors. She hadn’t seen the mandolin—pipa?—player or the other fae musician. “So it’ll be the four of you, like tonight?”

“Yep.” Jove followed her glance. “Tash and Rafi are helping take things

home. But they'll be there. Or if one of them happens to be out, we'll have a sub."

After saying goodnight to Izzy and Jove, Roxana turned toward home with her mother and daughter.

The air was finally cooling, a marine breeze blowing in. Crickets chirped and will-o'-the-wisps flickered in branches, mingling with the glow of shop signs. A floral scent clung in the air—sylph jasmine, a vigorous native vine, which had a way of climbing all over trees and buildings if one let it.

Roxana yawned. It had been a work day, and she'd been up since seven in the morning.

Ester still chattered, however, leaping between curb and sidewalk. "I'd never talked to her before, but I'd seen her at school. She's a grade above me."

"Ani, is that her name?" Amaris asked. "Jove and Izzy's daughter?"

"Oni," Ester corrected. "She says they live right next to the footpath, the one near the verge. In one of those old houses, the Chinese-style ones. I guess Izzy's ancestors built it. Oni says it's the gray one with the dragon pattern on the wall."

It had been a year or more since Roxana had ventured up there. So many beautiful paths, houses, views, that she took for granted. After August they'd be out of her reach.

"I should take a walk there tomorrow," she mused.

But Ester was already diving into her next flood of words, speculating which songs to request for their party and declaring she'd start a list and stick it on the fridge.



The path was lusher than Roxana remembered. Likely she had last been here in autumn or winter, when the trees were bare. In late June, every bush, tree, vine, and ground cover teemed with growth. Petals from at least four different kinds of flowers carpeted the path.

The sun was setting. Thick forest ran along one side of the path, cool air flowing from its shade. The verge lay that direction, a minute's walk through the undergrowth. Even from here she could see one of the signs marking the border: *Warning! Respect the truce. Do not enter.*

She had never crossed the verge and had no plans to. Roxana respected danger signage.

On the other side of the path stood the old country houses, widely spaced with streams, garden walls, and paths between them. Downhill, the houses and shops grew closer together, Miryoku's rooftops tumbling down the slope before giving way to strawberry fields and tawny seaside grass. Beyond that gleamed the sea, cool blue dappled with sunset orange.

She would see the ocean all the time once they moved to Port Baleia. It sat right on the coast, rather than five miles inland like Miryoku. How often she had dreamed of that, looked forward to it. Tonight it seemed almost unsettling, living in the spray of the waves, barnacles at one's feet, rather than having a comforting buffer of grass and earth between oneself and the sea.

A flame glimmered in the twilight. A little figure hovered near her, at eye level.

"Friend, would you like a guide for walking in the dark?"

Smiling, Roxana shook her head. "No, thank you."

The will-o'-the-wisp bobbed along beside her. "The foxglove fae are dancing tonight. This side of the verge. I'll show you."

"Thank you, friend, but no." In the pocket of her capris, she hooked a finger into the ring of the slim iron chain she carried, just in case.

She had reached the stone wall with the dragon pattern. A dragon-like statue lay on the ground outside it, chin on its paws. No one else was in sight. But if Ester was correct, the gray house beyond this garden belonged to Izzy and Jove. A quick detour would bring her to their door if she truly needed help.

"Come, friend, come," the faery coaxed. "It's pretty tonight, so pretty."

A great flare of light exploded: a bright figure flickering in fire colors beside the stone wall.

Gasping, Roxana stumbled back.

It was a six-foot-tall drake—or at least, drake was her best guess—standing on their hind legs.

"She has declined," the drake said. "Leave her alone."

The will-o'-the-wisp responded with a spitting noise like a drop of water hitting a hot skillet. "But!"

"Go." The drake's voice had the timbre of a human's, with a hint of fiery

crackle. “*We* let humans walk safely here, don’t we.”

The little faery circled a leaf, leaving single marks on it, then grumbled, “Very well,” and streaked away. Their light became one of many in the forest, winking on and off at a distance.

“That was kind of you. I appreciate it.” Roxana retreated a few steps back the way she had come. “Have a good evening, friend.”

“Wait.” The drake’s light flickered out, leaving behind a shadowy figure—who then rapidly changed.

The wings retracted, the front legs elongated to arms, the scales became skin, and the snout reshaped into a comely face. A naked person stood before her, nonchalantly dusting off his limbs—or at least, she guessed it to be a man, from the glimpse of anatomy she got before she looked away.

“It’s you,” he added. “From last night.”

She recognized his smile then—and his hands, as he picked up a red silk robe that hung over the gate and put it on.

“The string player,” she said.

“You were studying how I played.” He took an elastic loop from the robe’s pocket and swept his shoulder-length hair into a ponytail. “Something seemed to interest you.”

She came forward, now that he was someone known, and someone dressed. “I was trying to figure out what your strings were made of. Nickel?”

He lifted his eyebrows. “They are. Very good.”

She set her hand on the gate. “I get along best with metal. As a witch, I mean.” The gate was iron, as nearly everyone’s gates and fences were, especially those near the verge. He must have gotten adept at avoiding touching such things, if he regularly hung out on the human side. “What is your instrument? It looked like a mandolin, but not quite.”

He leaned on the stone wall, arms folded. “Close. It’s a liuqin.” He pronounced it *lu-cheen*. “It’s old and has its issues, but...it’s my treasure.” He looked across the path. “She wouldn’t have done much to you. The will-o’-the-wisp. Would’ve led you into the sticky mud near the foxgloves, probably, just for laughs. But we shouldn’t bother people, even in little ways like that.”

“No worries. I wouldn’t have gone. So *are* the foxglove fae dancing tonight?”

“Haven’t checked. But she said it, so it must be true.”

The gate’s hinge felt clogged, slow. A focused shot of Roxana’s magic, and the rust and dirt shivered off and fell in flakes to the ground.

His gaze tracked the motion, and his mouth curved up in acknowledgment.

“Did Izzy and Jove tell you?” Roxana asked. “You’ll be playing for us at the end of August.”

“Oh, that’s you? The going-away party?”

“My daughter requested Meloncollie specially.”

“The mayor’s family. Quite an honor.” He placed one hand on his heart. “My name is Rafi.” He paused, then extended the hand to her.

“Roxana.” She expected his skin to be hot, given he was by all appearances a fire faery, but his hand felt cool and dry. “What issues does your instrument have? Anything to do with metal?”

“Actually yes. It’s the fine tuners, the little ones at the bottom. They—do you want to come see? Easier than describing. It’s just right in here. No sticky mud or other dangers, I promise.” He angled his head toward the gate.

A small stone house stood in the garden. Plum trees and jasmine vines interlaced so thickly they almost hid it, but a string of golden lights along the cottage’s porch roof shone through to reveal its location.

A woman called something, and a younger voice—presumably Oni—answered from closer by, “I’m in the courtyard, Mom.”

It was surely safe to step in, with the family so near, and besides, Roxana felt drawn to any small problem in metal she might be able to fix. She nodded to Rafi, who wrapped the robe’s silk sleeve around his hand in a fluidly habitual motion, pulled open the gate, and led her in.

The path to the cottage was a tunnel through bushes and trees. The passage smelled rich and green for the few seconds she was in it, leaves brushing her shoulders and hips, then she emerged in a clearer space. The garden still burgeoned with vines, flowers, and knee-high grass, but now she could see across to the main house. Its windows and doors stood open in the warm night, light spilling out. The statues on the roof, of animals and fae, stood silhouetted against the twilight, giving the place the air of a stately manor.

The cottage in front of her, in contrast, had a covered porch so small it

probably couldn't have even fit a chair. Rafi cleared the two wooden steps in one barefooted leap, told her, "Have a seat," and darted inside.

He was back out again seconds later as Roxana was settling onto the top step. He slid down opposite her, robe perilously close to flapping open. With typical fae nonchalance, he didn't seem to notice—though to be fair, it was a nonchalance shared with many humans, considering the number of nude-friendly beaches and naked festival performers on the Southwest Peninsula.

He swiveled the liuqin so its end faced her. "It's these two." He tapped the outermost screws, which secured two of the four strings. "They keep loosening, and I go flat."

"It's beautiful." The signature energy of nickel resonated when Roxana touched the strings. The soundboard was pale wood, its back painted shiny red, and four ornately carved pegs in a matching red protruded from the narrow neck.

"It is. I wish I could keep it in perfect condition."

It was odd, the things fae could and couldn't do. Compared to the magic of human witches, fae magic seemed nearly limitless when it came to manipulating the natural elements. But when faced with human inventions, they often found themselves stymied.

"Let's see." She touched the screws, sending in a thread of magic to feel out their shape and depth. They were brass, and loose, slipping too easily. "It's not so much a metal problem. It's the wood having worn away around them. I'm not as good with wood, but if it's just a tiny bit like this, and if I get the metal to cooperate too..."

She transferred her fingers to one screw and gave it another push of magic. The screw's threads swelled, biting into the wood, which expanded a little. The change wasn't even large enough to see from the outside, but now the screw held. She made the same adjustment to the other, then said, "Try that."

Rafi swung the liuqin into playing position and plucked the string. It sang out a clear, high note. He picked the string beside it to compare notes, adjusted the tuning screw, then danced his thumb between them in a tremolo. "Ha." In triumph, he tuned the other repaired string and finished with a frolic of picked notes. "It's perfect. You've made my night."

"Metal that sings." She cupped her chin in her palm, admiring the shine

of the nickel in the soft porch lights. “I love it. I should work with musical instruments more often.”

“You should. We need a luthier here in town. I’ve had other matter-witches do this, but the fix always wears off.”

“So will this. But it ought to hold for, I don’t know, a month? Maybe less, if you’re playing a lot.”

“I’ll bring it right back to you when it needs redoing.” Then his smile subsided into neutrality. “But I forgot. You’re moving soon.”

“Mm-hm. But not till the end of summer.”

He strummed three chords in a cheerful progression. “In any case, I owe you. What might you want? Something from the fae realm?”

Roxana’s nature itched to turn aside such offers, give without receiving whenever possible. But fae tended to get agitated if you tried to leave a deal lopsided. Setting her elbows on her knees, she pondered the indigo dark of the tree tunnel. “Would you be able to get fae-realm metals?”

“Of course. How much? Enough to make an enchanted knife? A helmet, perhaps?”

She smiled. “Nah, just small amounts, any kind. I hear there’s copper and cobalt in the mountains.”

“Tin and silver and iron too. Possibly others.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to get iron, of course. Any of those would be wonderful. Really, even tiny amounts, like the size of a grain of rice.”

He laughed. “What could you do with so little?”

“Jewelry. I’m only good on the small scale, really. Those construction-worker matter-witches who can fling up walls? Not me. Never will be.”

“Ah, but they’re often less precise.”

“That’s the trade-off. I think of myself as a miniaturist.”

“I see. If you add spells to this jewelry, fae-realm materials would hold them better.”

“Yep. But the metals are hard to get hold of. Expensive. Which is why I only ask for a small amount.”

“As it happens, I’m going across the verge tomorrow.” He straightened his posture. “I grant you this deal.”

The words were fae in custom, but he looked remarkably human tonight.

The gold eye glitter from the performance was gone—it could have been glamour or simple cosmetics—and his eyes were the same dark brown as the average Eidolonian human’s, with charcoal-thick brows. Whether his arms were still covered in shining scales, she couldn’t tell, as his robe hid them.

“It’s gracious of you,” she answered.

Rafi set aside the liuqin and stood. “Do Jove and Izzy have your number? I can text you when I’m back with your metals.”

Roxana stood too. “They do.”

“Can never tell how long I’ll be, going across. The time variance.”

“It’s all right. No rush. Well—I should get home.”

They walked back through the tunnel, and Rafi opened the gate. “I’ll escort you, if you like. In case any other nuisances of my acquaintance appear.”

“No need, I’m not going far.”

“Then I’ll see you when I return, Roxana Wei.”

She nodded. “It was good to meet you.”

Orange light flickered beneath the skin of his palm as he waved goodbye. Two stars twinkled above him. Roxana waved back, drew a breath of jasmine-drenched air, and walked home.



After Roxana left, Rafi stood at the garden wall, resting his forearms on its top. The stone was still warm from baking in the sun all afternoon.

In the month since his grandmother’s death, he’d spent several after-dark hours out here, placing himself on guard. He’d shooed away a grand total of three fae pestering humans, none particularly dangerous. No fair feasters or goblins. No korreds. Sinister fae could of course be elsewhere nearby, enchanting people into oblivion.

There were verge guards whose job it was to look out for trouble. A witch and a faery working together, in most cases; such a station stood at every mile-marker along the verge. But Izzy and Jove’s house sat at the midway point between the two nearest guard posts, and a lot could happen in the space of half a mile, as Rafi well knew.

So though his presence wouldn’t make much difference in the korreds’ overall behavior, he kept watch. He felt restless if he didn’t at least try.

He hadn't expected *her* to show up.

Audience members at gigs often gazed avidly at him and the rest of the band, but Roxana had been different—scrutinizing his liuqin, arms folded, seemingly not even trying to get his attention and not aware he noticed her. He'd grown curious: what captivated her? What did she want?

Then she had met his gaze, her mouth had untwisted into that meek smile, and she had ambled away, leaving him wondering.

Now the mystery was solved. He inhaled the night air, his mouth lifting at the corners. Sourcing fae-realm metals so she could make enspelled jewelry: what a particularly pleasant errand.

"Rafi?" Izzy's voice floated across the garden.

He turned as she came up, a silhouette against the lights of the house. "Hey," he said.

"Got everything you need for tomorrow?"

"Yep. Standard mail run, sounds like."

"Good." Izzy picked a clump of moss off the wall. "You know, if it gets lonely out here, you could move into the house. Or just come hang out more. We'd love to see you."

"It's fine," he said—probably too quickly, judging from the way her hand stilled. "It's a luxury, having my own place," he explained. "Not that it's mine. But a space without, you know, fae wandering through and making noise at all hours. I'm liking it."

"All right. We just want you to know you're welcome to come in. Don't want you to feel like a second-class citizen."

"Well, I am that," he said lightly. "But that's how I want it."

She nudged his arm. "Hey, Oni's going to start some vampire film in a few minutes. Come watch if you like. I'm making cheese popcorn. That seals the deal, right?"

"It does," he admitted. "I'll get dressed and come in."

She laughed, noticing the robe. "Good call. See you in a bit."

CHAPTER 4

A TEXT LIT UP ROXANA'S PHONE ON THE FOLLOWING Saturday morning.

Hello Roxana, it's Rafi. I'm back and have things for you! Where shall I bring them?

Alone in the kitchen, in the house she and Ester shared with Roxana's parents, she beamed and set down her mug of green tea.

Hello! she typed. *I'm going into town in a bit. Would 11:00 this morning work? Could meet you at the Serpent Ave Bridge, near the amphitheater.*

His response appeared within a minute. *Yes that works. See you soon.*

He was waiting for her under the palm trees at the theater's entrance. Today he looked like any citizen in casual summer mode: blue T-shirt with Meloncollie's logo, baggy red drawstring trousers that ended below the knee, and clean setta sandals in hues of indigo and straw.

"Good morning," she greeted.

"Good morning." He swung a canvas bag off his shoulder and opened its flap. On the tan skin of his upper arms, scales glimmered in scarlet, gold, and black. He drew out a smaller cloth bag, dusty and stuffed full, and tugged loose its drawstring. "Hold out your hands."

He tipped the bag. Treasure spilled into her cupped palms.

To look at, they were nothing but chunks of rock. But power streamed from them in three, no, four different flavors, fizzing into her wrists and up to her shoulders.

Shaking the ore from palm to palm, she picked out the signature magic of each. "Oh my gods. Tin, cobalt, copper...silver! Rafi, this is amazing. This is way too much."

"Not at all. I know a friendly stone giant. Easy to get up into the mountains and smash some rocks loose, with help like that." His voice turned anxious. "Is it even enough to make anything from?"

“Are you kidding? This is worth—I don’t know, probably thousands of lira, if I turned it all into jewelry.” She closed her hands around the rocks and held them to her heart. “Bring me your liuqin anytime for the rest of my life if it needs fixing. I mean it. It’s on me.”

Eyes shining with pleasure, he gazed down at her. He was easily a foot taller than her. “I will, then.” He held open the dusty cloth bag. “Here. To keep them in.”

She carefully poured the rocks back in and took the bag.

“I suppose all the metal on the island used to be fae-realm metal,” he remarked.

“Yep. All those amazing charms that witches like Rosamund Highvalley made, back in the 1700s, probably packed such a punch because they were mostly fae-realm material. But once the verge got moved back, and humans stayed on their own side and stopped crossing it so much—well. It may mean our natural resources are less saturated with power now, but it’s probably for the best.”

He nodded. His black hair slipped down to shadow half his face. “Less accidental enchantment. Less...death.”

She tied the bag and tucked it into her straw shopping bag. “I already have ideas for what to make. I’ve been thinking about options.”

Rafi focused on her again. “Does it matter which metal you use? I wasn’t sure. That’s why I got a few kinds.”

“It can matter. The tin should be good for confidence and focus, though it’s adaptable. Copper’s good for things like love, creativity, harmony. And I could melt it with some of the tin and make bronze, which might hold a spell even stronger. Cobalt I’ve hardly ever worked with, so that’ll be interesting. Silver—ah, silver’s wonderful. Great for healing and calming.”

“Is that why silver jewelry is so common?”

“It’s why *magic* silver jewelry is so common. In the rest of the world, silver makes good jewelry because it’s affordable, bendable, strong, and shiny.” She stopped, her face warming. “Sorry. I get excited about metals.”

“I like it. I haven’t heard anyone talk about them quite like that.” He tilted his head and lifted his fingers as if sketching an outline of her. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you had earth fae ancestry, with that magic.”

“Rumor has it my great-great-grandmother was a gnome.” Roxana spread

her arms at her sides. “Thus the physique: short and round. It’s the family joke, anyway.”

Rafi grinned. “What will you make first, then, metalsmith?”

The title pleased her. It carried genuine respect; he didn’t seem to be teasing. “Well...sorry, you probably have somewhere to be? I don’t mean to take up your whole morning.”

“I have nowhere to be,” he assured.

“Okay. I have errands in town. Want to walk along?”

They crossed the footbridge, a red wooden arch with Aria Creek rushing below. The rainbow scales of fish and water fae streaked past beneath the surface.

“First,” Roxana said, “I’ll make one piece each for Ester, my mom, and my dad. Also my best friend Satsuki. Her dad died recently. She could use a grief-soothing charm.” They stepped out at the bridge’s opposite end. Shops topped with apartments lined the street.

“This is your job? You make charms to help people?”

“Only my side job at the moment. I work in IT, fixing metal tech parts. But mental health jewelry *will* be my job in Port Baleia. I’ll be working in a shop while studying at the art school to refine my skills. The shop owner is a friend of mine. She’ll be ecstatic if we can sell fae-realm metal pieces there.”

They strolled past the Chilean bakery. The smells of dulce de leche and empanadas wafted out. “No enchanted knives to dole out curses?” Rafi said.

She laughed. “Illegal. And I don’t forge weapons. Though these metals would make potent ones.”

“Witches can’t make enspelled weapons? What about those iron bracelets, for prisoners?”

“Well, yes. The government makes those. Usually to block witches from accessing magic when they’ve used it to hurt people. There’s also the empathy shackles, for people with sociopathic or narcissistic disorders, who’ve committed crimes.”

“It gives them empathy?” he asked. “To make them understand what they’ve done?”

“Exactly. And do it less in future, ideally. Because with their disorders, they can’t grasp otherwise why their behavior was cruel.”

He hooked a tendril of vine around his finger. It uncurled as he pulled it, then sprang back into its spiral against the brick wall. “I know of fae who

could use one of those.”

“Well, different rules apply over there.”

“Too few rules, I sometimes think.” He flicked a scrap of leaf from his finger. “But you make nicer charms. To calm people who feel troubled. Things like that?”

“Things like that.”

“Sounds useful. I’d like that. Sleeping better, taming my thoughts.”

She allowed several paces before answering. “You’re welcome to try them, but I don’t know how well they’d work on fae. Although maybe with these metals...” She was under the impression fae didn’t get all that anxious, however, and didn’t need to sleep much, nor had trouble sleeping if they chose to.

He cast her a shy smile. “All right. You were good to my liuqin, therefore I trust you. Don’t tell anyone, but I’m only half fae. I’m counted human.”

Her mouth fell open. “But—I saw you—”

“Endo-witch. With what the legal folk call ‘rare witch abilities.’”

“A form-changer.” She kept her voice soft, more in wonder than discretion. Fae could change their forms easily, on the whole, but it was rare for humans to be able to do so to the degree of becoming an entirely different shape or size.

“It’s simpler to pass as fae, since I’m not a citizen on the books. My upbringing was...atypical. The band knows, but most townsfolk don’t. I’m sorry for the deception.” He gave her a hesitant smile.

“But how are you...no, sorry, it’s all right. I won’t tell anyone. Thank you for trusting me.”

He seemed to anticipate at least one of her questions. “I grew up in the fae realm. Both my parents are half human but counted fae. One’s a drake, the other’s a korred. I ended up counted human.”

“A drake,” she said. “That’s what I assumed you were.”

He turned his arm to show the scales. “These take no effort. Part of my default form. But I have to expend a lot of energy for proper fire form. Even then, I’m not really a drake—can’t get as big as my mother, can’t fly or set fire to things. I can just glow and move fast.”

“I felt heat when you changed, on the footpath.”

“Not enough to burn anything.”

“Nothing from your korred side?”

“Can turn my skin to stone, become a statue essentially. You saw me like that on the path, before I flared up.”

Puzzled, she thought back. “The dragon statue? Wait, that was you?”

He was grinning. “You’ll notice it wasn’t there when you left.”

“I did not notice, in fact.”

“It’s my gargoyle form. That’s what the band calls it. I end up looking kind of like a drake, but in stone.”

She glanced up at the phoenix painted on the side of Starchime Music as they neared it. “Does your mother belong to Kepelo’s haunt, then?”

“My mother *is* Kepelo.”

Roxana’s feet paused. “The mightiest fae leader around? Is your mother?”

“Around *here*,” he said lightly. “She’s hardly a Sia Fia, say. Or an Arlanuk.”

Those were fae who ruled much larger haunts in the center of the island. They had held their territories since before humans had stumbled upon Eido-lonia in the 1700s.

“Even so,” Roxana began.

“Sorry, hang on. Delivery here.” Rafi stopped at Starchime and swung his pack down. He got out a few thick turquoise cards, folded and tied shut with red elastic cords: chantagrams, the generic blank kind you could record magical video messages onto.

He selected one and stashed the others in his pack. “Shouldn’t be long. Come in if you like.” He entered the shop.

The iron-barred glass door was propped open, but to enter, you had to pass through a beaded curtain of tiny bronze bells. As Roxana slipped through, they stirred in a whispery jingle.

“Hey, Meg,” Rafi strolled to the counter.

“Rafi! You made good time.” The person behind the counter had wide jowls, a wider smile, and truly impressively wide hair, frizzy and bleached orange. Roxana knew them casually, mainly from the various times Ester had tried learning an instrument—rented from this shop—and then given up on it.

Rafi gave Meg the card. “All seemed well. She’s looking forward to the next festival.” He spoke gently.

Meg pressed their lips together and blinked rapidly as they took the card. “Thank you,” they said to Rafi. “Really, thank you. I—I want to see this right

away. I'll be in touch again, all right?"

"Of course."

Meg hurried off into the back room with the chantagram.

Rafi turned to Roxana. "We can go," he said quietly.

They slipped back out onto the street.

"I take jobs sometimes as a cross-verge message carrier," he explained, "since it's hard for humans to reach people in the fae realm safely. There's a faery Meg likes to stay in touch with."

Roxana nodded, still feeling tender from witnessing Meg's reaction. "Children, parents, friends, lovers. I've heard stories."

"I'd do it for free—and I have—but if people want to pay...well, turns out living on this side requires *money*. What's that about?" His voice had lightened again. "Speaking of which. You have errands?"

"Yes—the Bazaar. For groceries."

"I love the Bazaar." Liveliness quickened his step. "When I first saw it, as a kid, it seemed like a magical treasure house."

"Even to someone who lived in the fae realm? Which is literally magical?"

"The fae realm is dangerous-magical. I'd have been dead a hundred times over by now if it wasn't for Kepelo." He didn't say it breezily, but not grimly either. Just a fact of life.

Roxana shivered. "She must be a good mother."

"I'm not sure. I didn't see a lot of mothers to compare with, until later."

They turned down a brick-paved alley leading to the Bazaar. Chatter, music, and the scents of crepes and steamed buns flowed down the passageway.

"She didn't protect me in person," Rafi added. "Not much, anyway. It was a deal she put in place between her and all the other fae whose territories border hers. Kill Rafi, or hurt him irreparably, and she takes over your haunt."

"Is this deal still in force?"

"As long as I live. Which, to a fae point of view, seems like it won't be very long. Probably why they agreed to it."

Hard to know how to respond to that. This was easily the most unusual conversation she'd had all year.

She tilted her head toward the soapmaker's stall. "Here's where I get shampoo. Come help me pick some."