

# THE STOLEN CROWN



BOOK FOUR IN THE EVER SEAS SERIES

LJ ANDREWS

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* NO.1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE  
STOLEN  
CROWN

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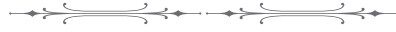


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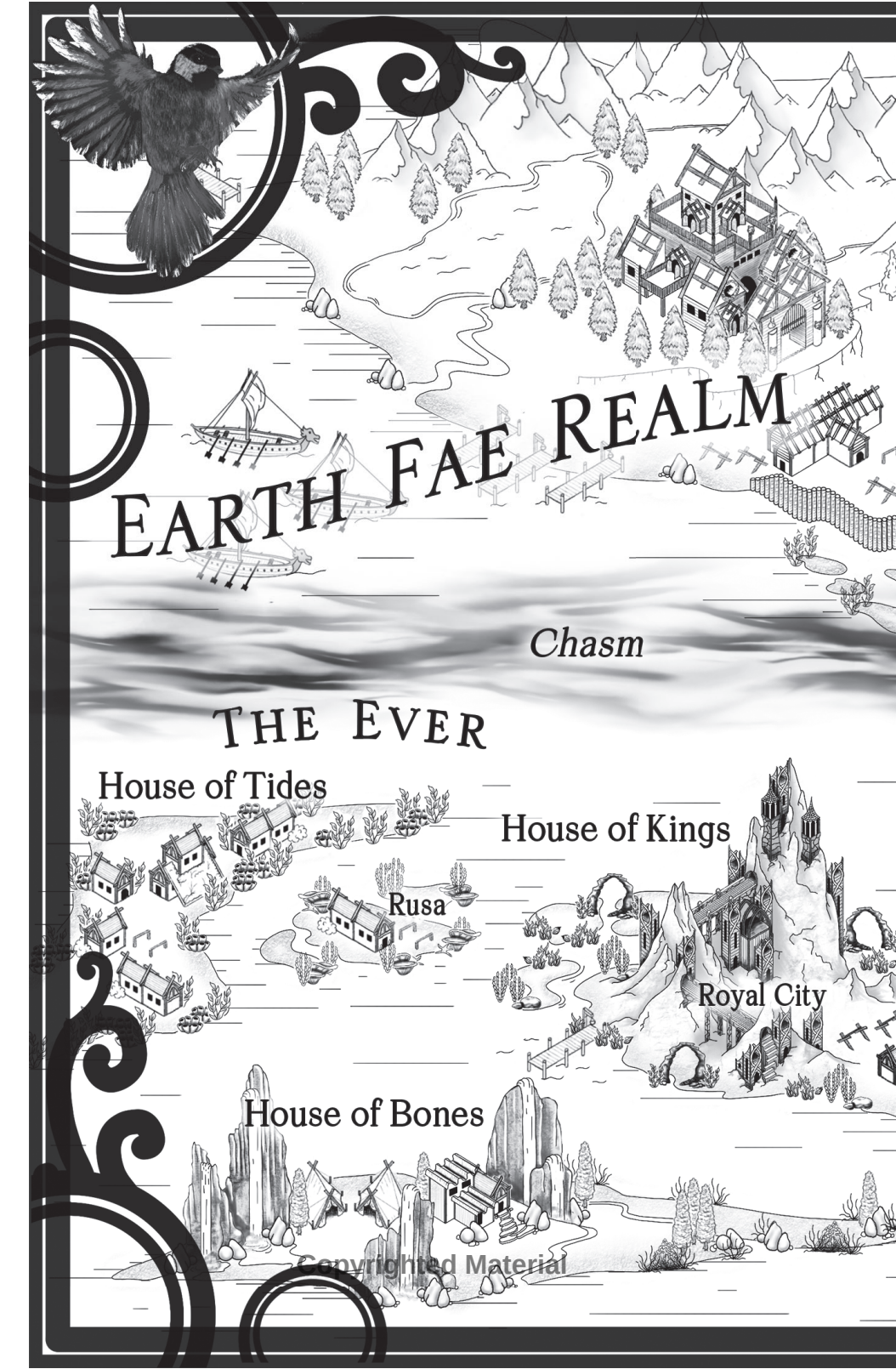
# AUTHOR'S NOTE



Dear reader:

This book contains heavy themes and content that might be upsetting to some readers. There will be discussions and traumatic responses due to past childhood physical and sexual abuse, complex PTSD, gore, torture, murder, threats of sexual abuse, and dark themes. Please protect your peace and your mental health. You matter.

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## THE EVER

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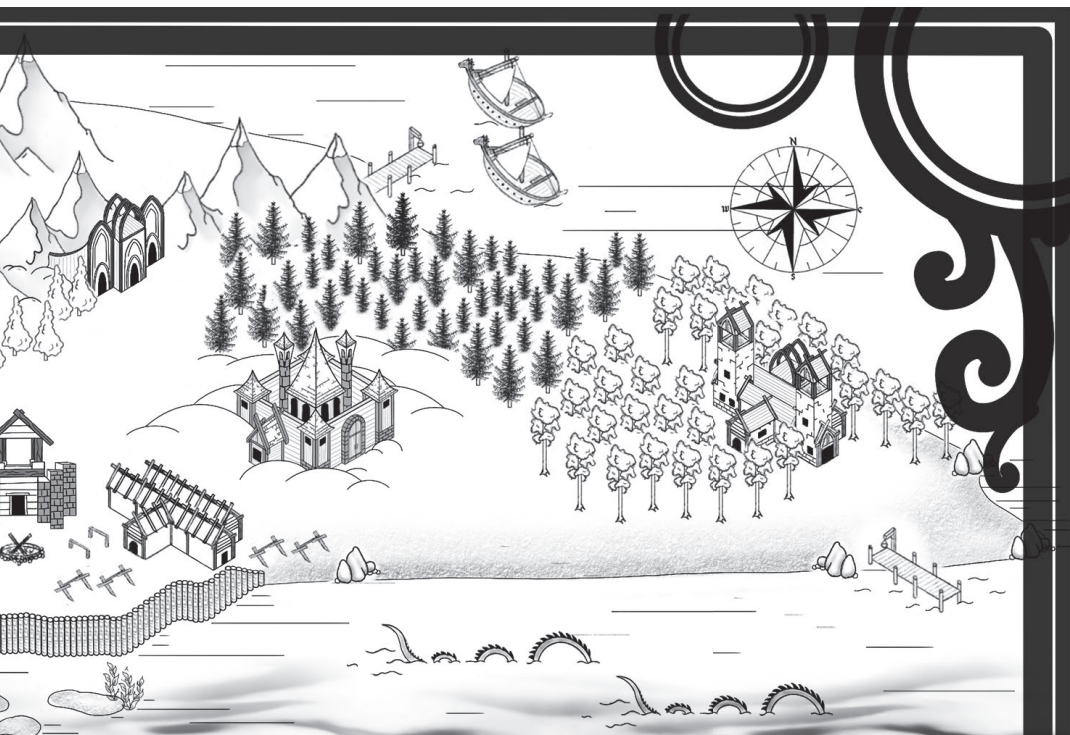
House of Kings

Rusa

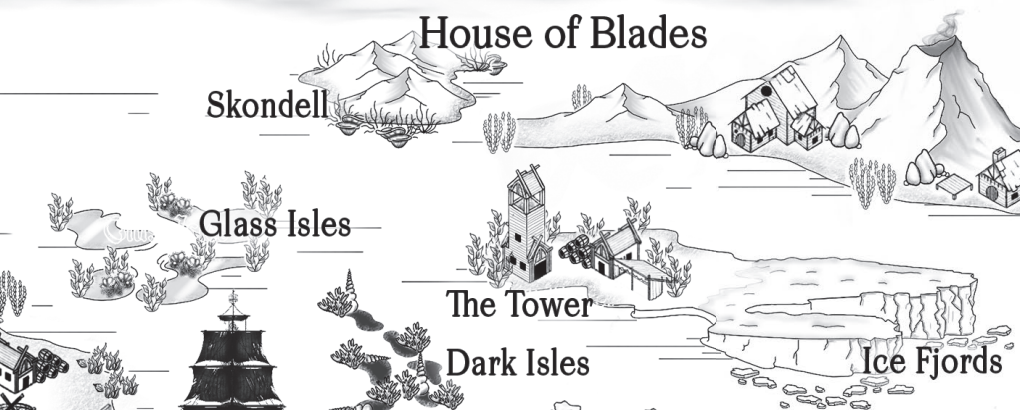
Royal City

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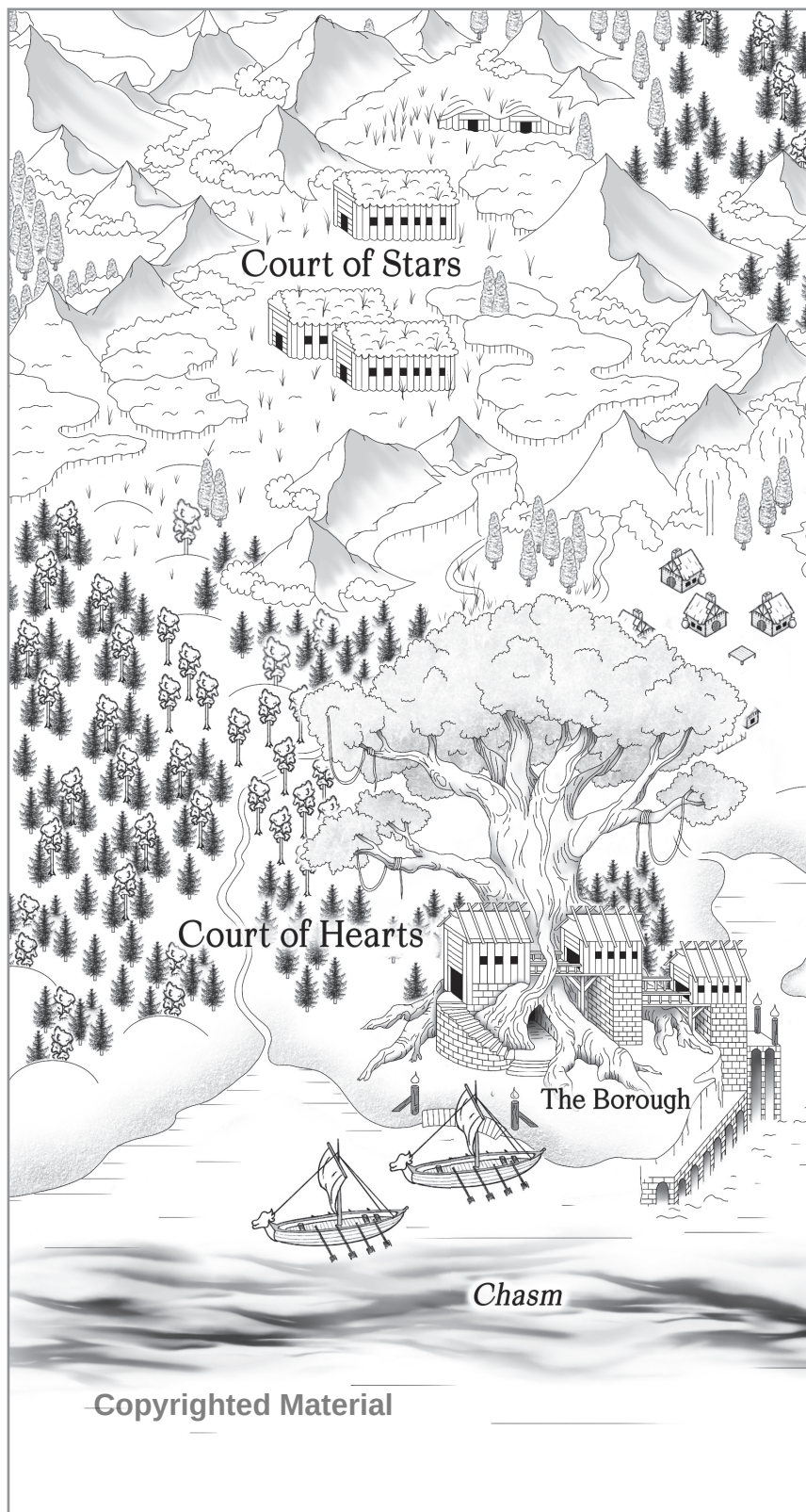
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House of Mists



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Court of Blood

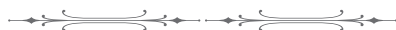
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# EVER SEAS RECAP



Welcome back to the Ever Seas. Here's what's happened already.

Over a decade ago, earth fae and sea fae fought each other in a great war. The war was brought to the earth realms under the command of Harald Songtaker, uncle of the young Ever King, and a dark earth fae who fueled Harald's lust for battle.

Through their hatred for earth fae and manipulation of sea fae and the young Erik Bloodsinger, the Great War between sea fae and earth fae began. Victory was won by the earth fae kingdoms after Harald was secretly killed by his nephew, and the dark earth fae was slaughtered by the king and queen of the glamour fae clan.

Erik Bloodsinger and Tait Heartwalker, the son of Harald, were the lone sea fae captured. The teenage boys were both eventually banished to the Ever Seas. To ensure the sea fae could not leave their realm, the earth fae sealed the Chasm, a magical barrier between the two worlds.

Ten years later, Livia Ferus, daughter of the earth bender king in the earth realms, unknowingly unlocked the Chasm. Erik, desperate for revenge, returned and kidnapped Livia and took her to the Ever Kingdom. Slowly, enemies became lovers, and Livia and Erik began to build peace between their clans.

Peace was halted when Larsson Bonekeeper, a secret traitor who desired the blood crown of the Ever for himself, revealed

himself as the half brother of Erik Bloodsinger. Larsson stole Livia, and Erik, along with his cousin Tait, returned to the earth fae, pleading for help in saving her. At first, only the heirs to the earth fae kingdoms—Mira Sekundär, Jonas and Sander Eriksson, and Aleksi Bror-Ferus (Livia's cousin)—snuck out and joined Erik and Tait. But with the help of Lady Narza, ruler of the sea witches and Erik's grandmother, Valen Ferus (Livia's father) joined in the search.

Through a new battle and more bloodshed, Livia was saved and the traitors of the Ever were defeated, but the earth and sea fae discovered a clan of elven were aligned with their enemies. To protect the realms, Prince Jonas of the alver kingdoms took on a spell that binds him to protect the Ever. Skadi, an elven princess with the power to destroy worlds, was believed to be the greatest risk if the elven ever rose again, for they would use her dark mists to destroy sea and earth fae. To lessen the risk of future battles, Prince Jonas and Skadi united in a marriage of convenience.

Over time, their reluctant alliance turned into something deeper and richer, until the elven enemies returned for Skadi, desperate to control her power for themselves. Once more, earth fae and sea fae rose together and defeated the dangerous light elven clan, allowing Skadi to take her place as an elven queen.

However, trouble was once more on the horizon. At the end of the elven and fae battles, Jonas and Skadi received a terrifying missive regarding an accident that involved Tait Heartwalker and Princess Mira of the glamour fae realms.

During the fight to hunt down the lost Ever Queen, Tait and Mira were forced to work together for Livia's sake and, like others, came to accept the new peace between earth and sea fae. Even if they did so with snide comments and tension between the two of them.

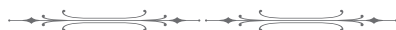
Now, lost and stranded in unknown seas together, the story of Tait Heartwalker and the glamour fae princess is only beginning.

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# PROLOGUE



THE BOY, NEWLY sixteen, let his head fall against the frigid wall. Here, in cold cells made of damp stone and iron bars, he waited to meet the seas of the Otherworld. But death had yet to come.

From crown to toe, his body ached. Cruel hands of his father had left countless marks over the turns. Frustration and rage from losses in the battles were written in a map of pain across the boy's shoulders, the sharpening edge of his jaw, and in one swollen cheek that hid one of his crimson-gold eyes.

In the realms of the earth fae—enemies of the Sea Folk—the air was too dry. The familiar russet shade of his skin was cracked and peeling in pale flakes. Gods, how he craved the damp, fragrant winds of the Ever, the serenity of her seas.

The Ever. *Home.*

His folk had already fled, abandoning their boy king. After everything, they ran like sods and left his cousin to die for a war he hadn't truly wanted.

But he remained. He would always remain, whether his cousin desired his presence or not. The boy would never abandon his king.

Corridors reeked of blood and piss and violence, but the battles were over. Screams, fear, all of it had lived on the shore and in the forests surrounding the strange spires of the earth fae stronghold for days.

Now, it was simply . . . done.

With a wince, the boy shifted across the moldy straw, careful not to jostle his cracked ribs. Pain was hardly an irritation compared to the fear inside his chest, knotted and harsh, for what might have become of the young Ever King.

From time to time, deep rumbles of voices filled the hallways. Doors across the way would groan as the iron clanged open.

He never heard screams or pleas from his cousin.

Perhaps Erik Bloodsinger still lived. Perhaps the hints of mercy the boy had witnessed at the hands of earth fae during battles might be sincere, and his own neck would not meet their strange curved mallets—axes, that was what one earth fae had called such a blade.

When a skein of silver dawn broke through the small arched window at the top of his cell, the hinges to his prison echoed in a sound that danced down the corridor like a haunt.

Two earth fae warriors filled the doorway with their dark eyes, bone piercings, and braided beards. Where Sea Folk were strong and lithe, earth fae were broad and powerful.

“Time to go, boy,” said one, a touch of weariness in his tone.

When the second warrior reached out a hand, the boy flinched and promptly despised his show of weakness.

Stranger still was the way the warrior slowed his movements, a look of something damn near regret carved into his features. Where the boy anticipated brutality and mockery, the warriors granted silence and steadiness.

Every step up the winding stone stairs sent sharp pangs of agony through the boy’s legs and spine. He blinked through the harsh

light once the warriors guided him, chains clanking around his wrists, into the great hall.

There, the sea fae boy took in perhaps the oddest of sights he'd yet come to know in the realms of his enemies.

A fae girl—so small she would need to crane her neck to meet his gaze—held a pathetic knife in her hand, more toy than weapon. The girl was clad in nothing but a simple shift, hair with a touch of sun red in the strands flowing down to her waist, and her eyes glittered a bit like moss in a storm, brown and green and gold.

For a breath, even the warriors were startled to a halt.

The girl slashed her knife and cried and cursed, all of it aimed at a severed head still spiked in front of the open inglenook.

The head of a dark, cruel earth fae. A man the boy knew was an enemy to the earth kingdoms, a man who fought on the side of his folk, the sea fae.

It was not a surprise to see an earth fae lashing out against a traitor. Truth be told, the boy could not blame her. He despised the dead man fiercely for the lies and hate he'd fostered in the boy's father. For the things the boy had been forced to do because that creature wanted war.

There were scars on the boy's heart and soul that would never fade, and they'd been carved by the actions of that dead dark earth fae.

No, it was not a surprise such hatred was shared for the same villain.

What was almost humorous about the scene was the ferocity such a small girl brought to the sunken, ashen face of the dark fae's head.

The boy could not help the rough rasp of a chuckle that rolled from his throat. It cracked and scraped over his lips, a signal he could do with a few gulps of water, but the sound was enough to draw the girl's attention.

She spun around, shoulders rising in sharp breaths. Red lined her thick lashes from tears, and bright pink flushed her cheeks.

“Princess,” one of the guards spoke gently. “You ought to run along. Trials will be starting soon.”

She sniffed and used the back of her sleeve to wipe under her nose. “Where you takin’ him?”

The warrior looked at the boy who peered nowhere but at the odd girl they called a princess. “To the shore. Battle always comes with a cost.”

The girl flicked her eyes from the warrior to the boy, head canted to one side. Gods, she was young. But beneath the gleam of innocence billowed a shadow in her girlish eyes. A shadow the boy understood well enough, when a young one had seen too much anguish much too soon.

“Good,” the girl gritted out through her teeth. “Hope it hurts.”

Call it a bit of madness from isolated days in the dank cell, but the boy spoke, flashing the sharp points of two teeth near the front of his smile. “I suppose we’re about to find out, vicious little princess.”

She blinked as though stunned the boy could speak. Then the girl lifted her chin, but she did not know how to hide the way it trembled. She did not know how to steady the quiver in her voice before speaking.

“I will be vicious, sea fae. Should I ever see your folk again, I’ll do the same to you as *my maj* did to him.” She used the simple blade to point at the head of her enemy.

The boy scoffed when the warriors pulled him toward the tall double doors of the great hall, a low “That I’d like to see” on his lips as they went.

When the boy and his cousin king were banished, locked beneath the tides of the seas, never to return, he felt a touch of relief.

No more threats of war, no wicked father to break his bones, no sweet princesses who pretended to be cruel.

Days would return to something dull, safe, and empty. But at least they would not be painful.

If the boy only knew how the fates would twist his path, he might've done more to unravel the folk of the earth realms before the sweet, vicious princess who flung blades at the heads of corpses unraveled him.

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## THE HEARTWALKER

THE EVER KING was going to die.

A slow, hopefully rather painful death. My queen would need to forgive me for slaughtering her mate.

“King says there’s no need to respond,” said Swordeater, a curious sea fae who could literally devour steel. He cupped an herb smoke as he lit the tip, utterly oblivious to my scowl. When he pulled in a long draw, Swordeater finally met my glare. “Merely said to send word when we set sail.”

“I can read, you ass.” One fist curled around the rough parchment Erik bleeding Bloodsinger had sent from the Ever, the home to which I very much desired to return.

In my other hand, I kept flicking open the face cover of a battered pocket watch. A gift from Lady Narza, the strongest sea witch within the House of Mists.

The watch was curious, a normal time-teller in most cases. But if the risk of danger rose, then the hands spun more swiftly, hinting time for safety was running short. If a true threat to the Ever King’s life rose—or to the one I gave my fiercest loyalty—the hands would point straight at him.

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Mere months ago, we battled for the throne of the Ever Kingdom against Larsson Bonekeeper, Erik’s unknown half brother.

Throughout the fighting, the hands on the clock face ticked to wherever my cousin stood in proximity to me, not spinning wildly, merely aiming at the one whose life was at the greatest risk.

Only after Erik landed the killing blow did the hands tick normally again.

No doubt, the Lady of Witches gifted me the watch since Narza knew my loyalty to my cousin—her grandson—would never falter, never belong to anyone else.

Until today.

No mistake, if Erik stood beside me, the hands of the small watch would be stiff and aimed directly at the Ever King, just as they had during battle, signaling his demise was imminent.

The hands ticked gently, telling the chime as though nothing was amiss. Seemed the magic of the sea witches believed Erik was safe. For now.

This was not what I agreed to after leaving the celebration of new vows in the alver kingdom.

Sea and earth fae alike had gone to witness a bond ceremony between Jonas Eriksson, a prince of the earth realms, and Skadi, the new elven queen. Strange how much had changed in the months since tentative peace built between the Ever and earth realms. Never did I think I'd be drinking ale with earth folk. Certainly not at vows where blades were nowhere to be seen.

By order of the Ever King, after the celebration I was directed to continue being the escort to an infuriating creature.

Not only did I sail the woman from the alver vows to her kingdom, now I was to wait and bring her to my queen for another damn visit, unharmed and unbothered. Once the task was complete, I would be free to return to my own self-imposed seclusion.

I was not meant to remain more than a damn day and night in the earth realms, particularly not in the knolls of the glamour fae.

But Erik changed everything.

Sweat slickened my palms. Tension knotted in my chest. Unbidden, I rolled one of my numerous silver rings around one finger.

“You ought to know, there be something—”

I held up a hand, silencing Swordeater until I soothed the tumult in my skull. When plans shifted, my aggravating mind careened a little out of control and it took moments, at times days, to feel right again.

A weakness I mentioned to no one. How would it suit the crew if they thought me so spineless that a simple change in itinerary sent my thoughts spinning? Like the thick stitches keeping their captain so neatly knitted had come undone.

I opened my eyes in time to realize Swordeater was reaching a hand out to strike my shoulder. The haze of instinct filled my mind and spurred my next moves.

I had the knife I kept sheathed across my chest leveled at the man’s throat in the next breath. “I would think twice before laying a hand on me.”

The sea gray of Swordeater’s eyes darkened, but he raised both palms in a show of goodwill. “I just be wanting to finish making me report.”

I pulled back the edge of the knife. “Then you will wait until I am ready to hear it.”

I thought Swordeater might’ve muttered something like “Be a dead bastard” in my silence. I hardly cared.

Pricks of phantom pain from a potential strike already coated my skin and left me wanting to retch. I’d learned to mask my fierce urge to recoil from the touches of others over the turns.

With the knife sheathed again, I shook out my palms, cracking my neck side to side.

My cousin’s order kept me here in the glamour kingdom for a duration of time that currently had no end. No doubt, Erik found it amusing, keeping me here as long as my royal charge desired.

My fingers curled into fists at my sides, thoughts of *her* spinning behind my eyes. A princess whose people likely despised me the most.

The king and queen of this land were, after all, the voices who once banished me after the war between our folk.

Perhaps I could not entirely blame the Ever King for altering his directive. I hadn't even let on to my cousin how desperately I clung to routine. Controlled plans meant controlled outcomes. No surprises. No pain.

*Control* meant no one would get the drop on me. Never again.

A difficult way to live since the seas of the Ever were never without shifts in agendas. Tides could change. Storms would arrive. And the crew would be forced to alter course. Such things I could handle fine enough; it was the way of the untamed sea.

Idleness and unknowns, those were the moments when darkness thickened in my thoughts.

"Heartwalker, you might be wanting to know—"

"Gods, man." I spun on Swordeater. "Our king has changed our agenda. Give me a bleeding moment to see his commands are able to be met. Supplies must be counted, unless you'd prefer to eat thistles instead of hardtack and rum."

Before he could respond, I set to pacing and promptly lit my own paper smoke.

With a long pull on the end, my breathing slowed. My mind felt a bit calmer.

Sea wind brushed across the deck of the *Sea Void*, warm and heavy with rich scents of blossoms and sweets sold at the shoreline market. The vessel was smaller than the king's ship, but it still towered over the longships and sloops docked beside us.

I peered over the rail as though studying the landscape might proffer a threat we could not ignore, one that would force us to meet the winds whether the glamour princess desired to stay or not.

Trees towered over paths with roots that broke the soil like great serpents, mosses of all shades—yellow, red, and brilliant green—speckled every boulder, every bit of bark, every stone. Here, narrow creeks cut through knolls and forests like dozens of blades had carved through the kingdom, bleeding out the water.

Glamour fae lands were whimsical, coated in lavender and velvet blooms, gilded pests with iridescent wings that glimmered in the night, and a constant flow of a honeysuckle breeze.

I missed the Ever Seas. But I'd take the tangles of trees and glossy leaves of the glamour fae kingdom over the chilled lands of the Night Folk fae of my queen, or the gloomy realms of the thieving alver clans.

I'd never admit to *her* that I didn't despise her kingdom.

Mira of House Sekundär.

Where the princess laughed and caroused, I preferred solitude and silence. The woman tolerated Sea Folk. No mistake, she played a convincing game of befriending a few souls from the Ever, but there was a memory I could not shake.

A violence, a viciousness lived in the soul of the playful princess.

Damn her and her false comradery. Damn her for taking up any space in my thoughts at all.

Not only was her house responsible for banishing me, but the king and queen of the glamour fae were the ones to land the killing blow that ended the war. My father stirred the vitriol and rage against the earth fae, enough to convince many in the Ever that war was inevitable. But there had also been a dark earth fae who lived in the Ever for turns. A man who manipulated and inspired the worst pieces of folk to bleed through.

Harald Songtaker, my father, joined with the dark fae and brought battles to these shores. Only when the dark fae lost his head beneath the sword of the glamour fae did fighting cease.

Both Harald and the dark fae were haunts of my past. Likely, they were haunts of Mira's too.

Why the killing blow came from her house, I didn't know. But it left me suspicious that out of any earth fae realm, the glamour folk likely despised sea fae the most.

I did not trust the princess.

I did not care for her.

And I despised how much all my disinterest somehow drew her to my mind, a slow-burning ember that stung just behind my eyes.

"Dammit, yer not even countin' our supplies!" Swordeater stepped in front of me, halting my steps. "So, you'll stop sulkin' and you'll listen to me, you bastard."

Tension pulsed in my jaw. "Bleeding gods, fine. Speak what you must speak!"

Swordeater was a burly sort but still jolted a bit when my lips curled, flashing the two slightly elongated points of my teeth, a trait most common in royal bloodlines of the Ever, much like the red in my eyes.

"I just be thinking you ought to know the royal lovey you've been *commanded* to oversee, well, there be reports Filib be huntin' her here."

My shoulders stiffened. "Filib? The sea singer?"

"Aye. One of the men thought they might've seen the blasted singer." Swordeater puffed a bit of smoke in my face. "Seen him goin' straight after a wanderin' earth fae princess. Now, if you be wantin' to save your neck from Bloodsinger, it'd suit you to be gettin' after her, says I."

"You're certain it was the princess?"

"Ye seem to think I don't know the lass. A little thing with a bit of a bite to those words she speaks all day. *That one.*"

Gods curse this day. I let out a rough hiss through my teeth.

“Why in the name of all the damn seas did you not say something sooner?”

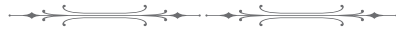
Swordeater huffed. “Bleeding tried to, didn’t I?”

I let out a grunt of frustration and hurried to the gangplank of the ship, Swordeater’s chuckles at my back.

“Hurry on now, Heartwalker. Don’t want any earth fae royal blood on our hands. It’ll fall on your shoulders if we be going back to war. Hurry on. Hurry on.”

I quickened my step, only drawing out more hacking laughs from the sod at my back.

As much as I had my reasons for desiring an immeasurable distance from Mira Sekundär, I could not shake the horrid truth that if someone had harmed her, their blood was about to spill.



## THE ILLUSIONIST

**M**Y BACK PRESSED against the damp bark of a willow. Fine dark soil crusted the bottoms of my boots from the riverbank. Mist kissed my cheeks, but I kept the woolen hood of the cowl off my long braid, the chill soothing the flush of heat in my skin.

One more read to ensure I had not misunderstood, then I crumpled the parchment. Made from kelp weed, the surface was damp and slick and smelled of wet straw. I grimaced and cursed the Ever King once more when a fetid residue was left behind on my palm.

“Gods. That bastard.” Erik Bloodsinger knew how much I detested the strange sea parchment. I shook out my hand, drops of pungent mossy water flinging into the river.

“Oh, don’t be sending me on with such a reply,” pleaded a voice like satin, smooth and delicate.

“Apologies, Vanna. I’d not dream of forcing you to relay such a message to your unsavory king.”

Eerily pale eyes like bulbous orbs peered over the bank of the river. The merwoman’s long, spindly fingers dug into ember blossom roots, a water flora in our realms that sprouted vibrant red petals in the shape of a barb. When dried, the petals served as excellent kindling.

Almost as though she could not help herself, Vanna plucked a root and slowly slid the pulpy end onto her tongue. Her needlelike teeth gnawed at the fibers, while she never took her eyes off me.

Merfolk tended to fill the coves, rivers, and lakes of the southernmost fae isles due to the blooms. They found the flavors of my kingdom invigorating. To the glamour fae—my folk—they were gritty and tasted of mold.

“What was written that has you in such duress, Lady?” Vanna asked.

“What has me in such duress, you ask? Well, I shall tell you. I had grand plans to visit dearest Livia, as you know, in the coming days. But, alas, there is to be a celebration in my court. Naturally, I sent word to Livie that I’d be slightly delayed. And her ill-tempered mate has now informed me that his odious cousin will also be remaining until, and I quote, ‘I am prepared to set sail, for I do not wish my tenderhearted queen to fret over the well-being of her beloved’—yes, he used ‘beloved,’ which is greatly unlike him—‘fellow royal.’

“In other words, Vanna, Erik Bloodsinger does not think anyone else on his crew is competent enough to escort me to the Ever. Highly offensive, don’t you think? All the more reason I’m convinced Bloodsinger is doing this because he knows I cannot stand his damn cousin.”

“Oi, that’s a great many words, earth fae. Apologies, but what is the trouble? I don’t understand your disquiet. It’s not like Heart-walker is here at your side now.”

“The problem is I am not a little who requires a sea fae escort to keep watch over me in my own kingdom. This is a game to your king.” I waved the smelly parchment in my hand a bit furiously.

“He has no command here, no authority.”

“Aye,” Vanna agreed. “But his cousin be under his authority. He’ll be needing to remain.”

“Well, Hearttalker can sit his ass on his horrible ship until I am ready to set sail. No need to be near each other until that very moment.”

Vanna’s eyes flashed. “I think you be meaning Heartwalker.”

I huffed and folded my arms over my chest, glancing toward the shadows of the trees. I meant exactly what I said. Why I continued to speak the wrong title to Tait Heartwalker, I didn’t know. He was a damn sod with a thick head, and the more I spoke my assigned name out loud for him, the more bruised my own heart became.

Vanna grinned, small and uncertain at first, then the jagged shards of her teeth gleamed nearly iridescent in the fading sun. “Me thinks you and his highness have a bit of a battle of wits. We do so love to see who stands on top when her ladyship visits our folk of the Ever.”

“Vanna, I do hope after all our interactions—which I’m certain are pleasanter than those with Erik Bloodsinger—you would know by now, I always stand on top.”

I flinched at the sound of a twig snapping in the distance, my fingers curling over the hilt of the dagger in my lap.

Only shadows danced between the moss-soaked trees of the riverbanks.

Vanna’s bony, scaly shoulders bounced when the merwoman let out a wet sort of chuckle, like blowing air into the surface of the sea. “Still don’t understand the outrage. I would greatly love to take Heartwalker for a swim myself.”

“Well”—I lifted my chin—“I do wish you’d get on with that swim.”

Merfolk were tricky creatures, fascinated with other folk and how they might fare beneath the tides. Always yearning to draw fae and mortal alike for a swim. Trouble was, we might never see the surface again should we oblige.

Vanna stole another root and crunched her sharp teeth over the

edges. "All I want is to know how well he can read my heart in the depths. Think his voice would still work?"

"I think it's worth finding out."

Vanna's eyes flashed like a shock of starlight. A hungry gleam of curiosity. A need, a damn near obsession to study and speculate, was the craving of merfolk. On this, I somewhat shared her intrigue. Tait Heartwalker had the power to read the desires of hearts, and it was one of many reasons I fought to remain agitated and aloof toward the man.

Lest he read a little deeper.

Tait was worse company than the Ever King, bore a deeper scowl, and seemed to despise every soul except for a few. I saved his damn life once, and all he returned were aggravated frowns.

Try as I did, I could not puzzle out Tait's disdain for me. Truth be told, I also could not explain the hurt it caused, a barb slashing over my heart, leaving a scabrous sort of wound behind. He was a loathsome creature, and it was ridiculous for me to have the slightest inkling for his regard.

Vanna wanted to know if the man was horrid? Yes. He was horrid and unpleasant and rude and unfairly beautiful. A man I could not stomach in one breath and in the other was left feeling like the moments near him were too few.

It made little sense, for I was not a woman so desperate to plead for a man's affection. No. I was the damn heir of the glamour fae, daughter of war enders, and a warrior in my own right.

Water thrashed when Vanna shifted, her fins slapping at the river's current. "I'll be off then, Lady. When you return to the seas of the Ever, do consider taking a swim with us."

I offered the same reply as always: "I certainly will consider it, Vanna."

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The merwoman let out a long hiss before she dove beneath the gentle flow and swam for the sea.

One more look at the missive explaining why the cousin of the Ever King and his crew would be dallying amongst the glamour fae, then I tossed the kelp parchment into the water.

How long should I make the man wait to journey to his kingdom? I might stay for an additional month. Perhaps I could torture him a bit and remain in my lands the whole of a turn. Tait's loyalty to his cousin was unmatched, and I had no doubt he would stay here, seething, through it all.

With a heavy sigh, I rose, brushing off pieces of moss and dirt from my skirt and cloak.

A turn without seeing Livia simply wouldn't do, but the thought of Tait's face twisted in unspoken rage was enough to tempt me. Surely, Livie would understand.

Then again, it might be better to simply go for the planned visit sooner rather than later, all to be rid of the man. Face-to-face, I could demand the Ever King never again give his order for Tait Heartwalker to escort me, or I would torment the entire royal house with the most fearsome illusions.

Glamour was a curious magic. More devious than some. Every fae was different and held unique abilities. Some could craft spells with blood and bone. Others, like me, manipulated minds with illusions so powerful they could convince others to walk straight off a cliff without even recognizing the danger. There were even glamour fae who could mimic and shift their forms and features.

In my land, it was challenging to know what was real and what was not.

Tait might be capable of reading my damn heart should he wish, but I could claim his mind.

I grinned, imagining all the ways to confuse and befuddle the man, and set about refastening my dagger with a hilt made from smooth alabaster.

To one side of the path, a black coach could be summoned,

should I desire it. One touch to a nearby bulge in the soil and troll folk who burrowed relentlessly throughout the fae isles would see to it any desire from their princess would be met.

A heavy sigh slipped from my chest. The sooner I returned home to the Borough Palace, the sooner I'd be surrounded by endless courtiers and questions and whisperings about the stoic, handsome sea fae who rarely left the docks.

Truth be told, I needed solitude for a time.

I'd take the route to the high court by foot. Here, I could stroll the knolls and forest roads that abutted the shoreline. It was a lovely walk, scenic and leisurely. My reasoning had nothing to do with the road sloping enough that I had a perfect view of the harbor, a perfect glimpse of any trade ships or . . . other vessels with larger hulls and endless sails.

I could use the time to unravel this horridly meddlesome attraction I kept for my stoic escort.

Tait Heartwalker was not simply intriguing due to his aggravatingly handsome features. From our earliest interactions, my heart stirred near the sod.

I hated him for it.

I did not want to desire such a disagreeable man. Where would such a soul fit in my household of brilliant satins and gilded revelry? I knew well enough love was meant to be consuming, unbreakable, damn near obsession. I had witnessed it with my own folk and friends to believe it to be true.

Affection and devotion were not supposed to be hateful and burdensome.

I brushed a heavy fernleaf aside and lifted my chin. It was long past time to accept that Tait Heartwalker was not the love of my fate.

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"I do not want him." My voice was hoarse, as though it were painful to speak the words.

And it did not go unanswered.

"Poor, sweet one. Sounds as though your heart be cracked. 'Tis releasing a love, so it seems. Allow me to take away the pain."

My pulse quickened, and desire thrummed in my veins, heady and wanting. Between two mighty ferns, a man emerged, half formed. His face was made of torn sinews that revealed mucus dripping between yellowed teeth and eyes as dark as a burnt corpse.

*Shit!*

Run. I needed to run. Instinct burned in my veins, jarring my legs forward. I spun on my heel, readying to flee, until something warm and sweet clouded my thoughts. A delectable shroud over the need to escape.

Why would I even think such a thing?

The creature, hideous as he was, no longer disgusted me. Fear was a distant memory. From his sagging lips came the sweetest sound. Cheery like a morning bird but low and sensual in the next melody, a husky whisper of a lover.

I took a step back, like something unseen still urged me to flee. But my heart yearned to stay. There was peace to be found here. Respite from the weary days. My mind spun in a frenzy, fighting a battle against my soul and its desire to linger a little longer.

A heated tremble shuddered through my body. In the next breath, my shoulders slumped and my legs no longer trembled with the need to bolt. Instead, a delirious ache pounded between my thighs.

I turned toward my stranger. Gods, he was not ugly, he was . . . beautiful. Sharp features made of porcelain. He could not be anything but carved by a god's hand.

"That's right, sweet one." His long fingers reached for my cheek.

My body arched into him. As lovely and surreal as this man

appeared, it was another stern face that filled my thoughts, painting over the stranger's features until he became someone else. Someone I detested and desired in the same heartbeat.

I touched my fingertips to his jaw, imagining it was the dark stubble always shadowing the jawline of the Ever King's cousin.

Hands surrounded my waist as the sweet-singing stranger tugged me closer. Want and desire and something dangerous raged through my mind. A collision of thoughts—stay or flee. All of it tangled in a battle between my logic and emotion.

The eyes of the stranger were no longer horrid; now all my mind saw was the sultry gleam of blood and honey.

I grinned. "Hearttalker."

I spoke the mispronounced name even with the small nudge in the back of my skull ringing that something was not right here.

The stranger looked every bit like Tait Heartwalker save for his height, the way his mouth twitched, and his smell. Where was the hint of worn leather and sea winds? Where was the musk of his smoking herbs?

I squinted at the stranger's face, stroking the sharp edge of his jaw. Tait would never smile at my rather amusing twist on his given name. He would bemoan it and frown deeper.

"Is it you?"

"Aye, sweet one. Won't be long now."

Won't be long until what?

The desire to remain close, disregarding every wrong thing about the singing stranger, was more powerful than a barbed hook snagged in the flesh. I could not move, could not pull back, even if I wanted to.

"Yes. Stay close, sweet," came a low hiss from the strange mouth hovering against the nape of my throat. Was I on the ground? Ferns littered the space around my head. Fingers trailed down my bodice. Pressure kept me pinned on my back.

Panic flooded my head. For the first time, the gentle hum of a song shattered in my ears like the harsh sound of steel clacking on stone. A flash of the rotting face returned.

Wrong. No, this was so bleeding wrong. Dangerously so.

I swung a hand and thought I might've cried out.

His warm, salty palm clapped over my mouth. "No, no. Hush, now. This broken heart won't take long to devour. I'll make the pain go away, sweet."

Sounded delightful.

Threads over my bodice tore, and I could feel the fabric spreading, could sense sharp fingernails trailing the skin between my breasts. The place over my damn heart. Sharp, jagged spikes pierced me there. His fingernails clawed at my body. I coughed and tried to protect the rapid thud in my chest.

A sea singer. He was a damn sea singer, and he wanted my heart.

The danger in singers of the Ever was that earth fae hearts could be easily devoured should the trance take hold. I knew well enough about sea singer voices. This was the second occasion where control was taken from me.

I tried to scream, but the sound was muffled behind his palm.

Something wet and hot—three hells, his tongue—licked over my skin. He moaned and drew in a long breath through his nose.

The same hypnotic voice reclaimed my thoughts, my desires, my want, flooding the panic from my head until my body went limp.

*Fight it.* I was supposed to fight such a voice, but . . . why?

He owned me, as he should . . .

All at once the pressure was ripped off my body. Air flooded my lungs in a gasp. The gentle melancholy of his voice sliced from my thoughts.

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With more clarity, I scanned my body. My dress was askew, bodice shredded and bloody, slightly baring my breasts through

the low-cut diaphanous shift I wore beneath my gowns. Nearby, two deep voices were arguing.

“What a fool you are for coming here, Filib.”

Gods, his tone rumbled through my veins with the same passion as a storm churned the sea. He was here, truly this time. Likely grousing about it, of course. But he was here.

I was safe.

“I cannot help my *nature*, Heartwalker. Once we have had a taste, I cannot resist another. She calls for my voice. Her heart should be mine.”

“Your hands should never have touched her. Certainly not a second time.”

“Please. *Please*, no . . .”

I blinked. Shadows, hazy and made of mist, crept into the edges of my gaze.

But through the darkness was a pair of bright eyes. Not as red as the Ever King’s, but not so gold he looked innocent.

My chest swelled with a raucous heat. I felt the corners of my lips lift into a grin when I met the true gaze of my surly sea fae escort. “Couldn’t keep away from me, I see.”

“Seems impossible since you keep taking such drastic measures to get my attention.”

I thought I might’ve chuckled, but soon the world fell away into a cold, fitful night.



## THE HEARTWALKER

A TREMBLE ROLLED FROM my shoulders to the ends of my fingers. An urge, almost insatiable, to reach out and shield her limp form from the sight of others. One of my palms twitched, but I curled it into a tight fist.

The warmth of her skin would only bring disquiet and jagged knots that tightened in my throat. Perhaps a part of me did not want to confirm it, my unspoken fear that Mira Sekundär was like all the rest—painful, nauseating, jagged glass on the skin.

Filib was on his knees, hands out like a pitiful supplicant. “I cannot be helping myself, Heartwalker.”

I could not touch the softness of the princess, but I held no qualms about bruising the rotted flesh of the sea singer. “If I recall, you said much the same when you touched the princess in the House of Bones not so long ago.”

When my queen was taken from the Ever, we’d hunted her across the kingdom, including the House of Bones where Gavyn Bonerotter held the lord’s seat. While there, Filib took to Mira straightaway and entranced her to the point of madness.

She’d clung to me that day, leaned against me, filled my lungs with the golden scent of her wretchedly beautiful hair. Her skin

pressed to mine had unleashed such a torrent of chaos in my thoughts, my lungs, my body, I'd made quick work of stacking even more barbed walls between us.

The grudge I'd held for this particular sea singer was long overdue to be paid.

I curled my fingers around the fleshy sinews of his face and drew his pustule-ridden brow toward mine. "Why the glamour fae? Why did it have to be her?"

Only a whimper slipped over his peeling lips. The sea singer's eyes were yellow, like a boil ready to split open. But fear was there. I basked in it, craved it. I yearned to have a place to unleash every drop of restrained violence in my veins.

My cousin shouldered the weight of being a brutal, ruthless king. Erik revealed his cruelty in the sunlight. I'd always unleashed mine in the shadows.

Filib winced when I slammed one palm against his rotted chest and started to hum. Low, controlled, and deep.

The surge of brine coated my tongue, like a wash of the sea that flooded my mind with Filib's desires. Gods, the depraved way he wanted to take her heart, the way he wanted to devour it slowly, slurping and savoring. Unbidden, my teeth clamped until my jaw throbbed and my fingernails dug into the acrid flesh of the sea singer, drawing blood.

True intentions, fierce desires, the honest nature of a heart, all of it could be revealed by my voice.

Filib winced when I tightened my grip on his pulpy jaw. "I—I—I had . . . had her, Heartwalker. I had her." His voice roughened. "You know once the scent of a heart settles inside a singer, it cannot be undone."

Sea singers were amongst the more monstrous creatures of the Ever Seas. When a scent filled their lungs, it never left. That was the reason Erik slaughtered the singer who'd once ensnared Livia.

The king hadn't offered the same fate to the glamour fae princess. I could oblige now well enough.

"You had her," I said, voice low, harsh. "Tasted her. I do hope it was worth it, for it will cost you your life."

Filib's eyes went wide. His protests were shrill and wet, as though he'd gulped large swallows of seawater.

With the flick of my fingers, I signaled to Fireweaver, one of the more brutal crewmen sent to accompany me. "Bring him to the ship as our guest. I'll see to him shortly."

"Aye, Heartwalker." One half of Fireweaver's smile drooped from an old injury. With the gaps in his teeth, his crooked sneer lifted hair on the neck.

I faced the unmoving princess.

By the tides, when she slept, the woman nearly looked innocent. A light flush of pink bridged her cheeks, her lips plumped in a natural pout, and the auburn streaks of her brown hair gleamed like hidden rubies in the sunlight.

What a stunning charlatan.

Beneath such a sweet outer layer resided a clawed viciousness she did not betray save for the gleam in her eyes.

I peered over my shoulder, then the next. Lush trees and vibrant blooms made up the forests of the glamour fae realms. But they were often empty. Folk resided in their strange glamour courts. Still, more than one pair of glowing eyes peered out from hollowed caverns in trees or from beneath bramble shrubs.

The glamour fae isles of the earth realms were littered with faeish creatures. Winged beasts with silver hair, somber stargazers who thought themselves rather superior, hideous folk with a need to bite and devour anyone in their path, and troll folk with their large eyes.

"I see you, troll." My glare fell to one of the wide shrubs with leaves as black as midnight.

From beneath the branches, a hand with curled claws emerged.

Next came a stout, rounded man who did not reach the buckle of my belt.

Deep crevices across the troll's roughened skin and his round head were coated in wiry white hair. His shoulders were thick as stone, and each fingernail curved into those claws used for burrowing below the soil. Tufted points of his ears were like the fae, but too heavy to keep straight. The ends curled forward and flapped with every step.

I knew the troll, a steward of sorts in the glamour fae palace.

And he seemed ready to bury me beneath his earthen tunnel. "Sees my lovely one lyin' there all helpless. Sees with my two eyes, one wretched sea fae towerin' over her."

I flashed my teeth. "Ah, with such remarkable sight, did you not also see the sea singer I ripped off your precious princess?"

"Alls Sea Folk be the same to me, sweetling," said the troll in a voice heavy and slow, like he'd swallowed a dozen spoonfuls of honey before opening his lips. "Don't trust the lot of you. Told my king as much, tells him every day. Seems like he'll be agreein' with me soon enough. Least when it comes to the likes of *you*. He don't like you much, after all. He been sayin' you stare too long at his lovely one."

*Shit.* I'd drawn the king's notice? Unease nibbled at my ribs.

As it was, I did not interact with the royal house if I could help it. Their affection for my queen was the only reason I did not believe the glamour fae would kill the lot of us without cause.

The troll clicked his long claws, a twisted sort of sneer on his plump lips. "What I'll be thinkin', sea fae, is my king'll want your hands first. Next your head, he will. Touch his lovely one and—"

"Dunker, your words hold no merit."

Another fae broke through the vines of hanging blooms. A frightening sort of man. Pale, icy eyes with narrow black centers.

Dark lips and skin like slate. He paused near the troll. "You can see there is no proof the Ever King's kin touched the princess."

The troll—Dunker—blustered at the sight of the newcomer. "Blood Lord, you are not seein' what I was seein'. The sea fae was surely about to hurt our lovely one."

"I haven't put a hand on her, you stupid beast," I snapped. The Ever had its fair share of creatures, but none so brazen and stubborn as these bleeding troll folk.

"Clearly," said the new fae, voice deep and even. "Your hands are in fists at your sides. How would you lay a hand on her in such a position?"

I blinked. This fae spoke as though I was utterly foolish for even defending myself. As though what happened here was wholly obvious.

Without a word, the imposing man shoved past the pouting troll and scooped Mira into his thick arms.

Unbidden, I held up a hand before he could walk away with her. "Who are you?"

Short of the king and queen, I had little desire to trust anyone beyond myself to handle aggravating Mira Sekundär.

"Gorm, of the Blood Court." Again, he spoke as though it ought to have been obvious.

"And where are you taking her?"

Gorm arched a dark brow. "The palace. She is a royal, and royals reside in palaces."

My jaw flexed. "I realize that."

"Stupid sea fae," Dunker mumbled under his breath. "Thinkin' he knows about our lands. Leave her out here to rot, he would."

"To the palace I go then." Gorm gave a nod and spoke as though he'd simplified his statements for my understanding.

Did the man think I was a fool?

He adjusted Mira's limp form in his strong arms, the sort that

knew how to swing a blade well enough. Strange as he was, the tall fae hadn't looked at me like an enemy, not even reached for the long blacksteel sword tethered at his waist.

"I have not lifted a blade to you, kin of the Ever King."

My brow furrowed. "I'm aware."

"Then I wonder why you thought I would?"

Good hells. Hair lifted on the back of my neck. Could the man read my bleeding mind? I could not summon the words to speak and merely shook my head.

Slowly, one side of his mouth curved into a snide sort of grin. "You are unsettled."

"You don't say." The whole of this bleeding kingdom unsettled me.

He flashed a wider grin, revealing longer fangs than even mine or Erik's. "Odd. I do not often agree with my king's many exaggerations, but he is right about you."

I stiffened.

The fae turned for the trees, then glanced over his shoulder. "As the king says, you are entertaining to unsettle."

When he disappeared into the tangle of aspens, a lurch of panic throttled the back of my throat.

The stonelike body of the troll blocked my path. Arms folded over his broad chest, Dunker huffed. "Lord Gorm might not see nothin' of ire in those thoughts of yours, but I don't trust the lot of you. Not with my lovely one, that is. Shoulda kept you lot banished off these isles, if you ask me."

"I wasn't asking," I sneered. "Did you say that fae read my damn mind?"

Dunker snorted, low and wet like a hog. "That's what I said. Be grateful the Blood Lord didn't see fit to take control of your pitiful thoughts. He could've, you know. That, I would've liked to see."

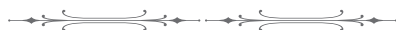
Sea Folk had formidable voices but so, too, did the earth fae. If

it was true what the troll said about this Lord Gorm, I'd do well to guard my damn thoughts.

Certainly any thoughts of Mira Sekundär.

With a final glare at the irritable troll, I cut onto a path leading back to the shoreline. For now, I'd trust the princess was safe with her folk. I could not say the same for a certain sea singer.

My mouth twisted into a smile. I could practically hear Filib's screams already.



## THE HEARTWALKER

I NEEDED THIS BASTARD to die already.

Whimpers from spineless men normally fed violent inclinations I repressed day after day. Screams sang to the dark, wretched creature that coiled around any lingering goodness in my heart, poised to strike if I lost even a sliver of control.

Tonight, the cries of pain were aggravating.

No mistake, I took more ruthless measures with Filib than I would otherwise. It had nothing to do with any sort of affection for the damn princess. I wouldn't allow the consideration to cross my thoughts. No, the disquiet came from irritation that this sea singer thought himself above our king's word. My cousin ordered Filib to leave earth fae be after his first interaction with Mira.

There were no second chances in the courts of Erik Blood-singer. Brutality came from Filib's sedition.

Nothing more.

I tipped my head side to side, cracking the knots free of my bones. "Lucky for you, I've grown bored, Filib."

The sea singer—battered and bruised—spat blood from his mouth. "Don't have to be this way, Heartwalker. W-we ought to barter a deal. The king enjoys a good deal, don't he?"

"At times."

Blood soaked the singer's lip. A frenzy of strikes from my fist had split his skin to the point that the edges of his teeth showed through the pulpy strings of flesh. One eye was swollen enough that it looked as though it sat crooked on his face. Perhaps that was more from the misshapen angle of his cheekbone.

"What d'you say, lad?" Filib spoke with desperation. His arms trembled from the angle of his position. Halfway through our discussion, I flattened both of his palms to the floorboards of the brig, then pinned them there by stabbing twin knives through the tops of his hands. He lifted his chin. "Let . . . these bygones be bygones."

"Hmm. What do I say?" Sweat had pasted the strands of my dark hair over my brow. I used the back of my wrapped knuckles to push it aside. "I say the Ever Seas will be better off without the likes of you."

One of my crewmen used his boot to push a wooden chair forward. I did not even look behind me before I gripped the back of the chair and cracked the legs across Filib's rotted face.

The sea singer slammed onto his side over the laths of the *Sea Void*, groaning and whimpering when the blades of the knives dug deeper into the flesh of his hands.

I slammed the legs of the chair against his spine. He cried out, pleading. My boot met his ribs. There was a heat-edged thrill in my veins when something snapped under his flesh.

He gasped and flattened over the floorboards, unable to move.

With the toe of my boot beneath the guard of each knife handle, I plucked the blades free. I kicked the sea singer until he rolled onto his back and slammed the stool back into place, each leg scraping along the sides of his arms, making a cage over his chest.

Filib's mouth tightened, his body trembled, but his swollen eyes lifted to mine when I straddled the seat of the chair and