

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE  
*VAMPIRE ACADEMY* NOVELS

# RICHHELLE MEAD

## SHADOW HEIR

Destiny is not an option...

## About the Book

***The Otherworld, a mystic land inextricably linked to our own - and balanced precariously on one woman's desperate courage...***

Shaman-for-hire Eugenie Markham strives to keep the mortal realm safe from trespassing entities. But as the Thorn Land's prophecy-haunted queen, there's no refuge for her and her soon-to-be-born children when a mysterious blight begins to devastate the Otherworld...

The spell-driven source of the blight isn't the only challenge to Eugenie's instincts. Fairy king Dorian is sacrificing everything to help, but Eugenie can't trust the synergy drawing them back together. The uneasy truce between her and her shape-shifter ex-lover Kiyō is endangered by secrets he can't - or won't - reveal. And as a formidable force rises to threaten the human world, Eugenie must use her own cursed fate as a weapon - and risk the ultimate sacrifice...

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About the Author

Also by Richelle Mead

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# Shadow Heir

A Dark Swan Novel

Richelle Mead

*For my brother Steve,  
who helps keep our family on track.*

# Acknowledgments

Bringing Eugenie's story to a close is bittersweet. She was my first real action heroine—and a fellow redhead to boot. I've had a great time writing her series and am grateful to all the friends and family who have loved me, supported me, and helped me come up with new and terrifying monsters for her to take down! Many thanks go to editor John Scognamiglio at Kensington, who took the chance on Eugenie and helped bring her story to print. Thank you also to my amazing literary agent, Jim McCarthy, for guiding these books every step of the way. And finally, I can't say enough how grateful I am to all the fans that have followed Eugenie on her journeys in both worlds. Your enthusiasm is what continues to make writing such a joy for me.

# Chapter 1

I'M SURE OHIO'S a perfectly nice place, once you get to know it. For me, right now, it was akin to one of the inner circles of Hell.

"How," I demanded, "can the air possibly contain this much moisture? It's like going swimming."

My sister, walking beside me in the late-afternoon sun, grinned. "Use your magic to push it off you."

"Too much work. It just keeps coming back," I grumbled. Jasmine, like me, had been raised in the dry heat of Arizona, so I couldn't understand why she didn't have the same revulsion I did to the monsoon conditions of high summer in the Midwest. We both wielded weather magic, but hers was focused primarily on water, so maybe that explained her blasé attitude. Maybe it was just the resilience of youth, seeing as she was about ten years younger than me. Or maybe, just maybe, it was because she wasn't nearly five months pregnant and hauling around an extra ten pounds or so of offspring who seemed intent on overheating me, sucking my resources, and pretty much slowing down every goddamned thing I did.

It was also possible hormones were making me a little irritable.

"We're almost there," said a polite voice on the other side of me. That was Pagiel. He was the son of Ysabel, one



of the bitchiest gentry women I knew—and she didn't even have excess hormones as an excuse. Pagiel hadn't inherited his mother's personality, thankfully, and possessed a knack for crossing between the Otherworld and the human world that rivaled mine and Jasmine's. He was roughly the same age as her, and the fact that I had to have a teenage escort to get me to my doctor's appointments only added insult to the many injuries I'd endured these last few months.

A block ahead, the Hudson Women's Health Clinic stood among its carefully pruned pear trees and neat rows of geraniums. The business was right on the line of the commercial and residential zones of the city and tried to give the appearance that it was part of the latter. It wasn't the pretty landscaping that made me keep coming back to this sauna, walking half a mile each time between the Otherworldly gate and the clinic. It wasn't even the medical care, which was fine as far as I could tell. Really, when it came down to it, this place's biggest appeal was that so far, no one had tried to kill me here.

That cursed wet heat had me dripping with sweat by the time we reached the building. I was used to sweating in the desert, but something about this climate just made me feel sticky and gross. Fortunately, a wave of air-conditioning hit us as we walked through the door. As glorious as it was for me, it was a miracle for Pagiel. I always liked seeing his face when he felt that first blast. He'd grown up in the Otherworld, where fairy—or gentry, the term I preferred—magic could work wonders. He wouldn't blink an eye at magical feats that would make a human gape. But this? Cold air produced by a *machine*? It blew his mind every time. No pun intended.

"Eugenie," said the receptionist. She was middle-aged and plump, with a kindly, hometown air about her. "Back with your family I see."

We'd taken to passing Pagiel off as our brother, for simplicity's sake. Really, though, it wasn't a stretch to

imagine us all being related. Jasmine's hair was strawberry blond, mine a light red, and Pagiel's a true auburn. We could have done advertising for the National Redhead Solidarity Group, if such a thing existed. No one at the clinic ever seemed to think it was weird that I brought my teenage siblings along, so maybe that was normal around here.

We took seats in the waiting room, and I saw Pagiel shift uncomfortably in his jeans. I hid a smile and pretended not to notice. He thought human clothes were crude and ugly, but Jasmine and I had insisted he wear them if he wanted to be part of my obstetric security detail. Normally, the gentry favored silks and velvet in their clothing, with flourishes like puffy sleeves and cloaks. Maybe he could have gotten away with that on the West Coast but not here in middle America.

Both he and Jasmine stayed behind when the nurse came to get me. Jasmine used to go in with me, but after an embarrassing incident when Pagiel had tried to attack someone with a Milli Vanilli ringtone, we'd decided it was best if he wasn't left alone. Although, I admit, it was hard to fault his actions.

I went to see an ultrasound tech first. As the mother-to-be of twins, I was knocked into a high-risk category and had to have more ultrasounds than someone with a "normal" pregnancy would. The tech situated me on the table and slathered gel on my stomach before touching it with her paddle. And just like that, all my crankiness, all my sarcasm—all the feelings I'd so haughtily walked in with—vanished.

And were replaced with terror.

There they were, the things that I'd risked my life—and the fate of the world—for. To be fair, the images still didn't look like much to me. They were only sketchy black-and-white shapes, though with each visit, they became increasingly more babylike. I supposed this was a marked

improvement, since for a while there, I was certain I'd be giving birth to aliens and nothing human or gentry at all.

"Ah, there's your son," said the tech, gesturing to the left side of the screen. "I was pretty sure we'd be able to spot him this time."

My breath caught. *My son.* As she moved the paddle to get a better angle, his profile flashed into stark relief, small arms and legs and a rounded head that looked very human. This tiny creature, whose beating heart was also clearly visible, hardly seemed like a conqueror of worlds. He seemed very small and very vulnerable, and I wondered not for the first time if I'd made a mistake in continuing this pregnancy. Had I been tricked? Had I been taken in by this innocent façade? Was I even now nurturing the man who prophecy said would try to enslave humanity?

As though sensing my thoughts, his sister stirred on the other side of the screen. She had been a large driving force in my decision to keep this pregnancy. If I'd terminated it in an attempt to save the world from my son, I would've been responsible for ending her life. I couldn't do that to her. I couldn't do that to him, even. It didn't matter what the prophecy said. They both deserved a chance to live their lives, free of what destiny had allegedly dictated for them.

Now, if only I could convince all the people who were trying to kill me of that.

"Everything looks great," the tech told me. She put the paddle away, and the screen went black, shrouding my children in shadows once more. "Perfectly normal."

Normal? Hardly.

Yet, when I was ushered into an exam room to speak to the doctor, her opinion was the same. Normal, normal, normal. Sure, twins required extra watching, but otherwise, everyone seemed convinced I was the model of a perfect pregnancy. None of them had any idea, not even the tiniest clue, of the daily struggle I went through. None of them knew that when I looked at my stomach, I was

tormented with the image of violence done in my name and the fate of two worlds hanging in the balance.

“Do you feel them move yet?” the doctor asked me. “It’s around that time.”

Images of *Alien* came to mind. “No, I don’t think so. How will I know?”

“Well, it’ll be pretty obvious in later pregnancy. This early, you start to feel fluttering sensations. Some people say it’s like a fish swimming around. You’ll know when it happens. Don’t worry—they won’t be trying to kick their way out. Not at first.”

I shuddered, not sure how I felt about that. Despite the changes in my body, it was still easy to regard this as some physical ailment. It was only the ultrasound that reminded me there were actually *people* living inside me. I wasn’t sure I was ready to also start feeling them squirm around.

The doctor glanced at her clipboard. “Honestly, everything looks great,” she said, echoing the ultrasound tech.

“I’m tired all the time,” I countered. “And I keep getting short of breath. And I’m having trouble bending. I mean, I can still do it, but it’s not easy.”

“That’s all normal.”

“Not for me.” I used to banish ghosts and beat up monsters for a living.

She shrugged. “You have two people growing inside of you. It’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

“But I have a lot of things to do. My lifestyle’s pretty, um, active.”

She remained unmoved. “Then you’re going to have to adapt.”

Despite my whining, I was sent off with a clean bill of health and instructions to book my next appointment. In the lobby, I found Jasmine and Pagiel exactly where I’d left them. She was leafing through a copy of *People* and trying

to explain to him both the definition and appeal of reality TV.

Maybe the office didn't bat an eye at my "siblings" because I simply had too many other weird habits. Like, for example, I always paid for each visit in cash. When you tacked on things like ultrasounds, blood work, and other medical testing, the final price tag was pretty high. I always felt like I was one step away from pulling out a Mafia-style suitcase filled with hundred-dollar bills. There was no alternative, however. I couldn't do anything that would allow my enemies to track me. Medical insurance claims would create a paper trail, as would even paying with a check or credit card. For the majority of gentry, none of that was a concern. Most were like Pagiel and could barely grasp the idea of banks or the postal system, let alone using them to track me. Unfortunately, my enemies in the Otherworld had very good connections here among humans, those who knew our systems inside and out. It was because of them I was in Ohio in the first place. Tucson had been compromised.

Another woman, far more pregnant than me, was just entering the office as the receptionist printed my receipt. A gust of wind swept in behind her, and she had to fight to catch the door and make it close. Pagiel, though inept at technology, had been trained in the gentry ways of chivalry and jumped up to help her.

"Thanks," she told him. She flashed the rest of us a cheery smile. "I can't believe how fast the weather turned on us. A cold front came out of nowhere."

The receptionist nodded sagely. "That's how it is this time of year. We'll have storms tonight for sure."

As if I needed another reason to dislike the Midwest. God, how I missed Tucson's unchanging climate. As I walked out with Jasmine and Pagiel, I knew I had an unfair attitude. I was simply feeling the woes of my self-imposed exile. I didn't really hate Ohio so much as I missed Arizona.

Once we were back in the Otherworld, I could visit the kingdom I ruled and practically be in a mirror of Tucson. I'd designed it that way. And yet ... it wasn't the same. I kept blaming everything on the weather, but a place was defined by more than just that. There was a culture and a vibe, driven by its people, that was unique to every location. The Thorn Land was great, but it would never replace my hometown.

"Damn," said Jasmine, trying to pry her hair off of her face. A fierce wind had whipped it right at her as soon as she stepped outside. "That lady wasn't kidding."

I pulled myself from my self-pity enough to note that she was right. The temperature had dropped, and that thick, suffocating air from earlier was now in motion as fronts collided. The cute ornamental trees swayed back and forth, like synchronized dancers. Dark clouds, tinged with a sickly green, gathered above. A chill that had nothing to do with the cool-down ran over my skin. My asshole gentry father, aside from getting me stuck with a prophecy that said his eldest grandson would conquer humanity, had also passed on his prowess with weather magic. I was tuned in to all the elements that made up a storm: the moisture, the air, even the charged particles that heralded lightning. My senses were open to them, and the intensity of all those factors hitting me at once now was a bit overwhelming.

"So much for a candy run," I muttered, peering at the angry sky. I was out of Milky Ways and pretty desperate for some. "We'll be lucky if we don't get drenched before we reach the gate." Not for the first time, I wished I had a car during these Ohio trips, but it was pointless. The only real reason I came here was for the clinic, and it was within walking distance to the gate that led back to the Otherworld. There'd be no practical way to keep a car here. Plus, riding in one would probably kill Pagiell.

I'd glanced at the sky, mostly verifying that things looked as bad as they felt, when something suddenly jerked

me to a standstill. If I scanned to the north, looking above a stretch of trees, I could see the edge of the storm clouds. The black ceiling above us only extended a mile, and where it ended abruptly, I could see sunshine and blue sky. I was willing to bet the air was stiflingly hot and humid there too. Looking around, I saw that was the case everywhere. Directly above us, the sky was dark, but those clouds extended in a very finite, very clearly defined way. It was like being under a perfectly round dome. All around those hard edges, sun fought to get through.

My companions came to a halt beside me, and I met Jasmine's gaze. "I feel it. . . ." she murmured. "I didn't at first. There was too much going on. . . ."

"Me too," I said. Along with feeling storm elements, she and I were also sensitive to magic specifically acting on them. What we were feeling now wasn't a natural occurrence. There were so many stimuli that the magic behind it had remained hidden to me initially—as was no doubt intended. There were Otherworldly forces at work. And with that realization came another: we'd been discovered. My Midwest safe house was no longer safe. "Fuck."

Pagiel's young face was grim as he glanced at me. "What do you want to do?" Pagiel had inherited his mother's magical prowess with air, so he too had probably figured out something was amiss.

I began walking again. "We've got to get to the gate. There's no other choice. Once we cross, we're safe."

"Whoever's doing this must know about the gate," pointed out Jasmine. "They could be on the other side waiting."

"I know. But that also means they would've had to defeat all the troops left behind." This gate in Hudson didn't open within the borders of my kingdoms in the Otherworld. It was close enough to my allies, however, that the journey had always seemed worth it in order to get safe medical

treatment in the human world. Still, we never made the journey without a considerable and armed escort on the other side.

The wind seemed to increase as we walked, blowing against us and slowing our progress. I could've used my magic to control it but was holding back until faced with the storm's creator—or rather, creators. There were only two people in known gentry history who could singlehandedly summon and control a storm like this. One was my deceased father. The other was me. My bet was that this was the work of a number of magic users, a thought that made me grit my teeth in frustration. A lot of planning would've had to go into this, which meant my enemies had known about Hudson for a while.

Almost as annoying as being found out was having to deal with my own physical limitations. I wasn't crippled, not by any means. I wasn't even waddling. But, as I'd told the doctor, I just couldn't quite do the things I used to. A half mile was not a huge distance, not at all, especially on suburban sidewalks. In my pre-pregnancy state, I could have easily broken out into a run and covered the distance quickly. Now, my best was a half-ass jog, and I was very aware of the fact that I was slowing Jasmine and Pagiel down.

We exited off the main road, cutting through the outskirts of a vast, wooded park. Otherworldly gates were rarely found in heavily populated, urban areas, and this one lay deep within the park's grounds. The trees blocked the direct force of the wind, but the branches were shifting wildly, showering us with twigs and leaves. We were the only ones out here, since most reasonable humans would've long since taken shelter.

"It'll be here," I called to my companions, forcing my voice to be heard above the wind. From the satchel I wore across my body, I produced my wand and an iron-bladed athame. "If they're going to attack, it'll be—"



They attacked.

Five spirits, two water elementals, and another elemental who glowed like a will-o'-the-wisp. Elementals were gentry who could not cross fully into this world in their original forms. They manifested as vaguely anthropomorphic creatures, composed of whatever element most strongly tied to their magic. From the scope of the storm, I suspected more were lurking nearby, but they were probably the weaker ones. It would take all of their power just to maintain these weather conditions, with none left over for fighting. These sent to battle us were the strongest, and the spirits were a backup choice I'd seen frequently. Spirits who hadn't moved on to the Underworld had no care for who ruled humans or the Otherworld. They were therefore easy recruits for the gentry who opposed me.

They weren't the only ones with help from beyond the grave.

"Volusian!" I called. I quickly chanted the words that would summon my undead minion. The sounds were lost in the wind, but it didn't matter. My intent and power were what counted, and within seconds, Volusian materialized. He was shorter than me, with pointed ears, red eyes, and smooth black skin that always reminded me of a salamander's. "The spirits!" I snapped.

Volusian needed no further urging. He hated me. He wanted to kill me, even. But so long as I bound him to my service, he was forced to obey my commands. He attacked the spirits with a fury, his magic flaring bluish white in the shadowy landscape. Jasmine had already set herself on the water elementals while Pagiel took on the will-o'-the-wisp, whom I assumed had some connection to air or the charges in the atmosphere.

And me? I hung back. I hated doing it but had no choice. We'd rehearsed this over and over. The decision to have these twins meant nothing if I let myself get tossed around

or—worse—killed. In protecting myself, I protected them, even though it went against every fighter's instinct I had. Fortunately, I wasn't entirely useless. Our attackers wanted me but were too distracted by my allies. This freed me to use my magic to diminish some of the more annoying effects of the weather. It also allowed me to banish the spirits. Volusian was well matched against them, but obviously, the less he had to deal with, the better.

I extended my wand at one of the spirits as it ganged up with another against Volusian. They were translucent, wraithlike creatures who floated in the air and would have been almost impossible to see outdoors in the sun. The shadows and clouds made them eerily discernible. Opening my senses, I reached past this world, past the Otherworld. I brushed the gates of the Underworld, establishing a connection that was solid but wouldn't pull me in. Banishing spirits to the Otherworld was easier and used to be my tactic when I was eliminating them for frightened suburbanites. Spirits sent there could return, however, and I couldn't take that chance anymore. The less of them around to come back for me, the better. It was the Underworld or bust.

I focused my will on my target, using the human magic I'd learned as a shaman to drive the spirit out of this world. The creature shrieked in rage as it felt the Underworld's tug, and seconds later, it dissolved into nothing. I immediately set my sights on a second spirit, briefly allowing myself to assess Pagiel and Jasmine's progress.

To my astonishment, Pagiel had defeated the will-o'-the-wisp elemental already. I hadn't even seen it happen. I had the power to banish elementals back to the Otherworld as well, but for my two sidekicks, physical confrontation was the only option. Pagiel had used his magic to destroy the elemental outright, obliterating it into nothingness. I'd known he was a strong magic user but had never truly seen him in battle until now. He was stronger than Jasmine, I

realized. He immediately joined her side against a water elemental, blasting it with a wind that brought it to a standstill while she used her magic to call on the water of the elemental's form and rip it to pieces. Meanwhile, I banished a second spirit.

"Eugenie, go!" cried Jasmine, barely sparing me a glance as she and Pagiel sparred with the last elemental. Volusian was down to one spirit. The odds were in our favor now. None of these attackers would have a chance to break away and come after me.

I grimaced but didn't hesitate. Again, this was part of the plan we'd established. These Otherworldly denizens were here for me. If I was gone, and they weren't destroyed first, they'd likely leave once they realized only Jasmine and Pagiel (and Volusian) were left. I felt like a coward and had to keep reminding myself, *If you die, the twins die.*

I took off at that half jog, continuing to use my magic to lighten the storm and make my passage easier. Ahead of me, a ring of bright yellow buttercups stood out in sharp contrast against the park's green grass. No matter how many times the landscapers mowed them down, the buttercups always returned within a day. They marked the gate.

I was steps away from it when something hit me from my left. The force knocked me over, and I only barely managed to twist my body in a way that minimized the jarring as my knees hit the ground. It had been foolish to think the gate wouldn't be guarded. My attacker was another elemental, seemingly composed of moss and leaves. They decayed and shifted before my eyes, marking just how weak the elemental really was. It could barely exist in this world. The creature's chances of survival were slim, yet it had apparently thought it worth the risk to its life to come and take mine.

I struggled to my feet as it came at me. In one leafy hand, the elemental held a copper dagger, honed to a fine point. Copper was the toughest metal gentry could wield, and even if it wasn't as effective as steel, it could still kill. The elemental's moves were awkward and lumbering, giving me enough time to get to my feet, even in my addled state. I still held the iron athame and felt some satisfaction that pregnant or not, I was faster than this bumbling creature. It swung at me, and I easily dodged, giving me an opening with my athame. The blade made contact, slashing across the elemental's green chest. It shrieked in pain, and I made an instant decision not to finish it off. I didn't have the luxury of playing hero. That injury was more than enough to slow the elemental and let me spring for the gate. I hurried into the ring of buttercups and reached toward the Otherworld. The gate was a strong one that worked at all times of the year and required hardly any effort from someone who knew how to use it. It was another reason we'd selected this area.

The paths between the worlds opened, and I felt a slightly disorienting sensation, like I was being taken apart and reassembled. Within seconds, I found myself standing in the Honeysuckle Land, surrounded by my own soldiers. There was no sign of any foes here, and from the startled looks my guards gave me, my battle-marked state was totally unexpected. They wasted no time in responding, however, and had their weapons drawn the instant the elemental followed me through the gate.

Only, it was no longer an elemental. It wasn't even an "it." It was a she, a gentry woman no older than myself with brown hair braided into a high bun. She staggered two steps toward me, still holding the copper blade, before falling to the ground. Blood spilled from her chest, showing the severity of the wound I'd given her. It had been done with iron—the gentry's bane—and occurred in the human world, where she was at her weakest. Maybe she could

have survived a similar injury in this world, but now, it was too late. The blade fell from her hands as she feebly clutched at her bleeding torso. All the while, her eyes never left me.

“Death ... to the prophecy. . . .” she gasped out, just before death took her. The light left those hate-filled eyes, and soon she saw nothing. I felt ill.

New arrivals from the gate immediately drew my guards to attention, but it was only Jasmine and Pagiell. They looked as if they’d been in a fight but otherwise showed no serious damage. Jasmine looked at me first, and despite her hard face, I knew she was checking me for injury, just as I’d done for her. It was hard to believe we’d once been enemies.

Satisfied I was okay, she then glanced at the dead woman before meeting my gaze. “Well,” Jasmine said, relaxing slightly. “At least you don’t have to go to Ohio anymore.”

## Chapter 2

THE LAYOUT OF the Otherworld defies human physics. There are no straight lines from point A to point B, even when you walk along a road that doesn't seem to curve or fork away. One step forward on a road may take you into a kingdom you thought you'd cleared ten miles back. Most of the kingdoms tended to stay in the same proximity to each other, but there were no guarantees. A road whose quirks you thought you knew by heart might suddenly change without warning.

Fortunately, there were no such surprises today. The road we'd taken to reach the Hudson gate eventually got us back to the Oak Land, with only the expected detours into friendly lands. The Oak Land wasn't one of my kingdoms. It was ruled by my strongest ally, who was also the one who made me the most nervous. Dorian and I had once been lovers and waged an Otherworldly war together. Things had fallen apart when he'd tricked me into a quest designed to conquer a kingdom I didn't want. We'd been quite hostile toward each other for a while, but my pregnancy had changed our relationship. He was one of the advocates of the prophecy that said my father's first grandson would conquer humanity, and so, even though he wasn't the father, Dorian had vowed to aid and protect my children.

Once he'd ascertained I was alive and well, however, he showed little sympathy upon hearing about our ambush.

"I never understood why you had to go to that Ohoho place anyway," he said, pouring a glass of wine. "I say good riddance."

I sighed. "It's Ohio. And you know why I was there. The twins need medical care."

"So you claim. They can receive 'medical care' here. Ours is just as good as humans'. Do you want a glass?" He held up the wine bottle.

I rolled my eyes. "No. And that's exactly the point. Medicine here's not the same at all. Wine's terrible for babies."

Dorian swept into the sitting room to join me, elegantly arranging himself on a love seat that displayed his purple velvet robes to best effect. "Well, of course it is. I'd never dream of giving wine to an infant! What do you take me for, a barbarian? But for you ... well, it might go a long way to make you a little less jumpy. You've been positively unbearable to live around."

*"I can't have it either. It affects the babies in utero."*

"Nonsense," he said, tossing his long auburn hair over one shoulder. Life would be easier if he wasn't so damned good-looking. "Why, my mother drank wine every day, and I turned out just fine."

"I think you're proving my point for me," I said dryly. "Look, I know you believe everything's fine here and there's no reason I should ever set foot outside the Otherworld, but I just don't feel safe not having this pregnancy monitored by a—human doctor." I'd been about to say "real doctor" but caught myself in time. It was true that I'd watched the gentry perform some amazing feats of healing. I'd literally seen limbs reattached. Yet, despite all the gentry magic, nothing could match the comfort I took in the reassuring numbers and bleeps of medical machinery. I was half human, after all, and had been raised that way.

“You don’t ‘feel safe,’ eh?” Dorian gave me one of his laconic smiles. “Tell me, did the assurance you got from your human doctor today outweigh the potential damage you received when that elemental knocked you around?”

I scowled and looked away. Even though I’d managed to land fairly well when I’d fallen near the gate, I’d still had Dorian’s healers check me out when I returned. They’d performed some minor spells on me to relieve bruising and had sworn there was no injury to the twins. They had no diagnostic equipment to prove it, but gentry healers did have an innate sense for such things in the body, just like I was sensitive to the components of storms. I had to take it on faith that the healers were correct.

“We should’ve been more prepared, that’s all,” I muttered.

“How much more prepared can you be?” asked Dorian. He still spoke in that easy way of his, like all of this was a joke, but I could see the hardness in his green eyes. “You already traipse through this world with a veritable army at your back. Are you going to start bringing them with you into the human world too?”

“Of course not. We’d never get a hold of enough jeans to outfit them all.”

“You risk yourself. You risk them.” Dorian pointed at my stomach, just in case there was any question who he meant. “You shouldn’t be going to the human world. Honestly, you shouldn’t be traveling between kingdoms here! Pick one. One of yours, mine, it doesn’t matter. Just stay still *somewhere*, and stay protected until they’re born.”

“I’m not very good at staying still,” I remarked, noting a similarity between this conversation and the one I’d had when I told the doctor about my physical frustrations.

To my surprise, Dorian’s face actually softened into sympathy. “I know, my dear. I know. But these are unusual times. I’ll give you this: moving around does make it harder for them to find you. Maiwenn and Kiyō can only monitor so



many places at once, so there's something to be said for not staying entirely stationary."

*Maiwenn and Kiyō.* My heart twisted. We rarely ever spoke those names. Usually we just said "the enemy" or simply "they." But even though there was a large contingent of gentry who wanted to stop Storm King's prophecy, we all knew that two in particular were the real threats. Maiwenn was queen of the Willow Land and had once been a friend. Kiyō was my ex-boyfriend and half human like me.

He was also the father of my children.

Kiyō ...

If I thought about him too long, my emotions would get the best of me. Even after our romantic relationship had begun to fracture, I'd still cared about him. Then, he'd made it clear that he considered me and the twins acceptable losses to prevent any threat to humanity. I certainly hadn't wanted to see the gentry conquer the human world either, but his actions had left me reeling. It was still a hard reality for me to accept, that I could know someone so well ... and yet not really know him at all.

"What do you think we should do about the wedding?" I asked, forcing myself to change the subject. "They know I'll be there." Two servants of mine, Rurik and Shaya, were getting married soon, and I was hosting the festivities.

Dorian nodded, eyes narrowed in thought. "They also know all of your allies and a number of others who simply don't want to be on your bad side will be there. So long as we can get you back to the Thorn Land securely, there shouldn't be—"

"I don't care what he's doing! It's imperative I speak to him *now!*"

Dorian and I both flinched at the interruption and turned in surprise toward the source of the angry female voice. Guards standing sentry at the sitting room's door immediately began protests about how Dorian wasn't to be

disturbed, but it was clear those explanations were being ignored.

A world-weary expression crossed Dorian's face. "It's fine," he called. "Let her in."

I'd been sprawling on a chaise, nearly as at ease as Dorian, but now I straightened up. I knew who this newcomer was and wouldn't be caught off-guard.

Ysabel came striding into the room, wearing a gown that was elaborate even by gentry standards. I always thought the best term to describe their fashion sense was "Medieval rave." Her dress was made of a heavy silver satin with a crazy V neckline that went nearly to her stomach. A pattern of seed pearls trimmed all the hems and also adorned her long auburn hair. I wondered if she was on her way to some formal event or if she was simply continuing in her efforts to lure in Dorian. She'd been his mistress until he and I were together, but he hadn't resumed things after our split.

Perhaps more astonishing than her attire was that she had company. Trailing in her wake were Pagiel and her formidable and generally unpleasant mother, Edria. The boy had to hurry up to keep pace with the other two and looked miserable. A few moments later, his younger sister Ansonia also entered nervously. She had long hair, almost the color of mine, and looked terrified to be here.

"Your Majesty," exclaimed Ysabel, coming to a halt before Dorian. I couldn't tell if her cheeks were flushed with anger or bad makeup application. Considering the gentry often made their cosmetics out of nuts and berries, neither possibility would have surprised me. "This is unacceptable."

"Mother—" began Pagiel, reaching her side.

Ysabel pointed at me, anger flashing in her eyes. "I refuse to allow her to keep endangering my son! Why, he nearly died today."

"I did not!" exclaimed Pagiel.

Dorian gave Pagiel a calm once-over. "He looks fine to me."

"It was a very close thing," said Edria gravely.

"I don't know," I said, recalling how quickly Pagiel had dispatched his foe. "From what I saw, he had things under control."

"How would you know?" asked Ysabel with a sneer. "*You* ran away."

I felt a blush of my own creeping over my cheeks. My new coddled status still grated on me, as did the knowledge that I had to keep myself out of harm's way while others defended me. No matter how logical it all seemed, I'd never be easy about it.

"Hey, I did my part," I said.

Ysabel had already turned away from me and was addressing Dorian. "It isn't right that my son is risking his life for *her*."

"Agreed," said Edria. Her dark hair was pulled back so tightly that I swore it stretched the skin on her face. Maybe it was the gentry equivalent of a facelift. "He has no stake in this alleged prophecy concerning her son. He owes her nothing."

Pagiel kept trying to interject and was constantly shushed by his mother and grandmother. I felt bad for him, particularly as the only male in that family. His father had died years ago, and Ysabel's father had allegedly been some ne'er-do-well who ran out on them. Pagiel had no one but women around.

Dorian glanced between Ysabel and Edria. "I'm not ordering him to do anything for her. He goes with her by choice."

"But it's not safe," said Ysabel.

Dorian remained unmoved. "And again, I say that he goes with her by choice. Honestly, I'm not really sure what you expect me to do. Your son is a free citizen of my kingdom, and he is of age to make his own decisions."

Ysabel looked on the verge of stomping her feet. “It’s dangerous! Isn’t it your job to protect your subjects from harm?”

“Certainly,” said Dorian. “And at the same time, I must also look after the kingdom’s needs. I can hardly protect every soldier in times of war, can I? And even if we aren’t technically at war right now, this kingdom is supporting the Queen of Rowan and Thorn. Doing that has certain unavoidable dangers, but there’s nothing to be done for it. Hence my use of ‘unavoidable.’ I can hardly denounce him for voluntarily choosing to assist her. And, in fact, since he’s gone above and beyond to keep her safe—as today’s skirmish proved—he’s actually due for commendation.”

Pagiel beamed under his king’s praise, but Ysabel’s face grew darker. Part of me felt a little sorry for her. After all, she was a mother trying to protect her son. Bitchy or not, she did care about him. At the same time, it was hard for me to give too much credit to someone who’d often used her son for her own gain. After the death of her husband, Ysabel had come to Dorian’s court with the sole purpose of seducing a man (preferably the king) who would then provide for her. Bringing Pagiel and Ansonia had been a ploy on Ysabel’s part to enhance her own allure. Fertility was a continual concern among the gentry, who didn’t conceive easily. Flaunting her two children was Ysabel’s attempt at showing off what a good catch she was.

“There, you see?” asked Pagiel triumphantly, finally getting a word in. “I have the king’s support. I believe in what I’m doing. I want to further the prophecy.”

I winced a little at that. While I was thankful to those who were helping protect me from Kiyō and Maiwenn, that gratitude was marred by the knowledge that most who aided me did so in the hopes that my son truly would conquer humanity. Gentry and humans had once shared the same world, but the former had eventually left as magic

faded and technology rose. Many gentry felt they'd been wronged and deserved a claim back there.

"You're a foolish boy," snapped Edria. "And you have no idea what you believe in. Half of why you do this is because of her sister."

I saw a flicker of embarrassment in Pagiel's features, but he held his ground. It was true that I'd originally gotten to know him when he began showing a romantic interest in Jasmine. Over time, however, he'd become vehemently opposed to those who would threaten unborn children and had taken my side because of that.

"My reasons are my own," Pagiel returned, glaring at his mother and grandmother. "Not yours. This is what I'm choosing to do, and you can't stop me."

The three of them seemed to have forgotten us and had been drawn back into their own private family dispute. Ansonia continued skulking in the back. I was guessing her mother had ordered her here to show family solidarity.

"Pagiel's been amazing," I said, hoping to lend him a little support. "In fact, he's been essential on our trips to the Otherworld. Few other gen—er, shining ones have that kind of power in the human world."

"Power that's being wasted," said Edria with a sniff. "He has more important things to do than be your errand boy."

"Grandmother, you can't talk to her like that!" Pagiel looked mortified. "She's the Queen of Rowan and Thorn."

"I don't care if she's—"

"Enough," said Dorian, raising his hand. Everything about his posture was still easy and relaxed, but there was sternness in his voice that drew everyone's attention. "This conversation is done. There's nothing I can—or will—do. Both of you charming ladies must accept that Pagiel is a man and in control of his own life. Although, if it's any comfort"—he spared me a brief, amused glance—"I doubt he'll be traipsing off to the human world anytime soon, now that Her Majesty's secret hideaway is no longer so secret."

I scowled but made no argument—because he was right.

Pagiel's blue eyes lit up. "I'll help you find a new place," he told me. "I'll check all the gates and see where they lead into the human world."

I smiled indulgently. I was beginning to think Dorian might have a point about staying holed up in this world, but I didn't want to dress Pagiel down in front of Ysabel and Edria. "Thank you, Pagiel."

Ysabel looked ready to explode. "This isn't finished."

"Oh," said Dorian. "I assure you, it is. Now go. All of you."

That commanding tone was back, and after some obligatory curtsies and bowing, the family scurried off.

"They're always so delightful," said Dorian.

"Not the first word that comes to mind for me," I said, watching as the guards shut the door again. I sighed. "Although, I really *do* hate the idea of anyone risking their lives for me. Especially Pagiel. I like him."

"That's the unfortunate thing," said Dorian, smiling. "It's always going to be people you like. Enemies tend not to risk their lives for you. Only your friends are willing to make the sacrifice. Besides, I thought you got over this moral quandary when we went to war against Katrice?"

"I wouldn't say I ever really got over it. Mostly I learned to deal with it."

"That may have to be a permanent philosophy for you."

"Maybe," I agreed. I stood up, stretching to relieve an ache in my back that hadn't been there earlier. Great. One more way my body was falling apart. "I should get back to the Thorn Land now."

Dorian rose with me. "Not yet."

I eyed him warily. "Trying to keep me around?"

"Just being smart. Maiwenn's agents were probably watching this hold, waiting to see if you'd return after their ambush. If they're still in the area, it's best you not take to the roads, escorted or not. That, and they'd also likely