

The fate of their world lies in her hands...



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About the Book

An embattled realm mystically entwined with our own, the Otherworld is at the mercy of one woman ...

Shaman-for-hire Eugenie Markham is the best at banishing entities trespassing in the mortal realm. But as the Thorn Land's queen, she's fast running out of ways to end the brutal war devastating her kingdom. Her only hope: the Iron Crown, a legendary object even the most powerful fear ...

But who can she trust to help her? Fairy king Dorian has his own agenda. And Kiyō, her shape-shifter ex-boyfriend, has every reason to betray her. To control the Crown's all-consuming powers, Eugenie must confront an unimaginable temptation - that puts her soul and the fate of two worlds in mortal danger ...

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About the Author

Also by Richelle Mead

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IRON CROWNED

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For David, my first reader

Chapter 1

Don't confuse fairy queens with fairy princesses.

Where I come from, girls who want to be fairy princesses usually dream about gossamer wings and frilly dresses. Pink dresses, at that. I'm pretty sure rhinestones are part of being a fairy princess too, as are cute wands with stars on top that grant wishes. Fairy princesses expect lovely lives of luxury and lounging, ones that involve small woodland creatures waiting on their every need.

As a fairy queen, I can admit that there is a bit more involvement with woodland creatures than one might expect. But the rest? A total joke. Fairies - the kind I deal with, at least - rarely have wings. My wand is made of rough gemstones bound together, and I use it to blast Otherworldly creatures out of existence. I've also whacked a few people in the head with it. My life is dirty, harsh, and deadly, the kind of life no frilly dress could withstand. I wear jeans. Most important, I look horrible in pink.

I'm also pretty sure that fairy princesses don't have to deal with this kind of shit first thing in the morning.

'I have killed ... Eugenie Markham.'

The words rang out loud and clear through a dining room filled with about thirty people eating at round wooden tables. The ceilings were vaulted, and the rough stone walls made it look like part of a medieval castle because ... well, it kind of was. Most of the morning diners were soldiers and guards, but a few were officials and high-ranking servants who lived and worked within the castle.

Dorian, King of the Oak Land and my bondage-loving Otherworldly boyfriend, sat at the head table and looked up from his breakfast to see who had made such a bold statement. 'I'm sorry, did you say something?'

The speaker, standing on the other side of the table, turned as red as the uniform he wore. He looked about twenty-something in human years, meaning he was probably a hundred or so in fairy - or gentry, the name I preferred - years. The guy bit his lip and straightened his posture, making another attempt at dignity as he glared at Dorian.

'I *said* I killed Eugenie Markham.' The man - a soldier, it appeared - looked around at the faces, no doubt hoping his message would inspire horrified reactions. Mostly his words brought about good-natured confusion, largely because half of the people gathered in the room could see me standing in the hall outside. 'I have killed your queen, and now your armies will crumble. Surrender immediately, and Her Royal Majesty, Queen Katrice of the Rowan Land, will be merciful.'

Dorian didn't answer right away and didn't look very concerned. He delicately patted his mouth with a brocade napkin and then returned it to his lap. 'Dead? Are you sure?' He glanced over at a dark-haired woman sitting beside him. 'Shaya, didn't we just see her yesterday?'

'Yes, sire,' replied Shaya, pouring cream into her tea.

Dorian brushed autumn-red hair out of his face and returned to cutting up the sugary, almond-coated pastry that was serving as his most important meal of the day. 'Well, there you have it. She can't be dead.'

The Rowan soldier stared in disbelief, growing more and more incredulous as people continued to either regard him curiously or simply ignore him altogether. The only person who seemed mildly concerned was an elderly gentry woman sitting on the other side of Dorian. Her name was Ranelle, and she was an ambassador from the Linden Land.

She'd only arrived yesterday and clearly wasn't used to the wacky mishaps around here.

The soldier turned his attention back to Dorian. 'Are you as insane as they say you are? I killed the Thorn Queen! Look.' He threw down a silver and moonstone necklace. It clattered against the hard, tiled floor, and the pale, iridescent stones just barely picked up some of the morning light. 'I cut this off of her corpse. *Now* do you believe me?'

That brought some silence to the room, and even Dorian paused. It was indeed my necklace, and seeing it made me absentmindedly touch the bare spot on my throat. Dorian wore his perpetually bored expression, but I knew him well enough to guess at the maelstrom of thoughts swirling behind his green eyes.

'If that's true,' Dorian replied at last, 'then why didn't you actually bring us her corpse?'

'It's with my queen,' said the soldier smugly, thinking he'd finally gained ground. 'She kept it as a trophy. If you cooperate, she *might* release it to you.'

'I don't believe it.' Dorian peered down the table. 'Rurik, will you pass the salt? Ah, thank you.'

'King Dorian,' said Ranelle uneasily, 'perhaps you should pay more attention to what this man has to say. If the queen is dead—'

'She's not,' said Dorian bluntly. 'And this sauce is delicious.'

'Why don't you believe me?' exclaimed the soldier, sounding oddly childlike. 'Did you think she was invincible? Did you think no one could kill her?'

'No,' admitted Dorian. 'I just don't think *you* could kill her.'

Ranelle tried again. 'My lord, how do you know that the queen isn't—'

'Because she's standing right there. Will you all shut up now so I can eat in peace?'

The interruption - and end to this farce - came from Jasmine, my teenage sister. Like me, she was half human. Unlike me, she was totally unstable and was consequently eating her breakfast while wearing loose but magic-stunting handcuffs. She also had headphones on, and the breakfast debate must have been overpowering her current playlist.

Thirty faces turned toward where I stood near the doorway, and there was a mad scramble as almost everyone shoved back their chairs and tried to rise for a hasty bow. I sighed. I'd been comfortable leaning against the wall, resting from a hard night's journey as I watched this absurdity unfolding in my Otherworldly home. The gig was up now. I threw back my shoulders and strode into the dining room, putting on all the queenly airs I could.

'The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated,' I announced. I had a feeling I'd messed up the Mark Twain quote, but in this crowd, nobody knew the reference anyway. Most thought I was simply stating the facts. Which, really, I was.

The Rowan soldier's flushed face suddenly turned white, his eyes bugging out. He took a few steps backward and glanced uneasily around. There was really nowhere else he could go.

I gestured for those who were standing and bowing to sit down as I walked up to my necklace. Picking it up from the floor, I eyed it critically. 'You broke the clasp.' I studied it for a few more moments and then turned my glare on him. 'You broke it when you ripped it off my neck while we were fighting - *not* when you killed me. Obviously.' I just barely recalled grappling with this guy last night. He'd been one among many. I'd lost him in the midst of the chaos, but apparently, Katrice had decided to send him here with a story after he'd captured this 'evidence.'

'You look amazing for being dead, my dear,' called Dorian. 'You should really come join us and try this sauce

that Ranelle brought.'

I ignored Dorian, both because he expected me to and because I knew I didn't look so amazing. My clothes were ripped and dirty, and I'd accrued a few cuts in last night's battle. Judging from the haze of red I kept seeing out of the corners of my eyes, I had a feeling my hair was frizzy and sticking up in about a hundred different directions. It was already turning into a hot day, and my stuffy castle was making me sweat profusely.

'No,' gasped the Rowan soldier. 'You can't be alive. Balor swore he saw you fall - he told the queen—'

'Will you guys stop this already?' I demanded, leaning in close to his face. This made a few of my own guards step nearer, but I wasn't worried. This loser wouldn't try anything, and besides, I could defend myself. 'When is your fucking queen going to stop turning every rumor about Dorian or me dying into some huge proclamation? Haven't you ever heard of *habeas corpus*? Never mind. Of course you haven't.'

'Actually,' piped in Dorian. 'I know Latin.'

'It won't work anyway,' I growled to the Rowan guy. 'Even if I were dead, it's not going to stop our kingdoms from trampling yours.'

That pulled him out of his stupefied state. Fury lit his features - fury spiked with a little bit of insane zeal. 'You half-breed bitch! *You're* the one who's going to be blighted from existence! You, the Oak King, and everyone else who lives in your cursed lands. Our queen is mighty and great! Already she's in negotiations with the Aspen and Willow Lands to unite against you! She will grind you with her foot and take this land, take it and—'

'Can I kill him? Please?' This was Jasmine. Her gray eyes looked at me pleadingly, and she'd taken the headphones off. What should have been teenage sarcasm was actually deadly seriousness. It was days like these I regretted keeping her in the Otherworld, rather than sending her

back to live with humans. Surely it wasn't too late for reform school. 'I haven't killed any of your people, Eugenie. You know I haven't. Let me do something to him. Please.'

'He's under a truce flag,' replied Shaya automatically. Protocol was her specialty.

Dorian turned toward her. 'Blast it, woman! I've told you to stop letting them in with immunity. Wartime rules be damned.' Shaya only smiled, unconcerned by his mock outrage.

'But he *is* protected,' I said, suddenly feeling exhausted. Last's night battle - more of a skirmish, really - had ended in a draw between my armies and Katrice's. It was incredibly frustrating, making the loss of life on both sides seem totally pointless. I beckoned some of my guards forward. 'Get him out of here. Put him on a horse, and don't send him with any water. Let's hope the roads are kind to him today.'

The guards bowed obediently, and I turned back to Katrice's man.

'And you can let Katrice know that she's wasting her time, no matter how often she wants to claim she's killed me - or even if she manages it. We're still going to see this war through, and she's the one who's going to lose. She's outnumbered and out-resourced. She started this over a personal fight, and no one else is going to help her with it. Tell her that if *she* surrenders immediately, then maybe we'll be merciful.'

The Rowan soldier glared at me, his malice palpable, but offered no response. The best he could manage was to spit on the ground before the guards dragged him off. With another sigh, I turned away and looked at the breakfast table. They'd already brought up a chair for me.

'Is there any toast?' I asked, sitting down wearily.

Toast was not a common item on the gentry menu, but the servants here had gotten used to my human preferences. They still couldn't make decent tequila, and

Pop-Tarts were totally out of the question. But toast? Toast was within their skill set. Someone handed a basket of it to me, and everyone continued eating peacefully. Well, almost everyone. Ranelle was staring at all of us like we were crazy, which I could understand.

‘How can you be so calm?’ she exclaimed. ‘After that man just - just - and you ...’ She looked me over in amazement. ‘Forgive me, Your Majesty, but your attire ... You’ve clearly been in battle. Yet, here you are, sitting as though this is all perfectly ordinary.’

I gave her a cheerful look, not wanting to offend our guest or project a weak image. I’d just arrogantly told the Rowan soldier that his queen would never gain any allies, but his comment about her negotiating with the Aspen and Willow Lands hadn’t been lost on me. Katrice and I were both scrambling for allies in this war. Dorian was mine, giving me the edge in numbers right now, and I didn’t want to risk any chance of that changing.

Dorian caught my eye and gave me one of his small, laconic smiles. It warmed me up, easing a little of the frustration I felt. Some days, it seemed like he was all that was going to get me through this war I’d inadvertently stumbled into. I’d never wanted it. I’d never wanted to be queen of a fey kingdom either, forcing me to split my time between here and my human life in Tucson. I certainly hadn’t wanted to be at the center of a prophecy that claimed I’d give birth to humanity’s conqueror, a prophecy that had driven Katrice’s son to rape me. Dorian had killed him for it, something I still didn’t regret, even though I hated every day of the war that had followed in the killing’s wake.

I couldn’t tell Ranelle any of that, of course. I wanted to send her back to her land with an image of confidence and power, so that her king would think allying with us was a smart move. A brilliant move, even. I couldn’t tell Ranelle my fears. I couldn’t tell her how much it hurt me to see

refugees showing up at my castle, poor petitioners whose homes had been destroyed by the war. I couldn't tell her that Dorian and I took turns visiting the armies and fighting with them - and how on those nights, the one who wasn't fighting never got any sleep. Despite his flippancy, I knew Dorian had felt a spark of fear at the Rowan soldier's initial claim. Katrice was always trying to demoralize us. Both Dorian and I feared that someday, one of her heralds would show up telling the truth. It made me want to run away with him right now, run away from all of this and just wrap myself up in his arms.

But again, I reminded myself that I had to brush those thoughts away. Leaning over, I gave Dorian a soft kiss on his cheek. The smile I offered Ranelle was as winning and upbeat as one he might produce. 'Actually,' I told her. 'This *is* a pretty ordinary day for us.'

The sad part? It was true.

Chapter 2

I retreated to my bedroom as soon as etiquette allowed, collapsing onto the bed the moment I entered. Dorian had followed me in, and I tossed an arm over my eyes, groaning.

‘Do you think that display helped win us over with Ranelle or scared her off?’

I felt Dorian sit on the bed beside me. ‘Hard to say. At the very least, I don’t think it’ll turn her king against us. We’re too terrifying and unstable.’

I smiled and uncovered my face, looking into those green and gold eyes. ‘If only that reputation would spread to everyone else. I heard a rumor the Honeysuckle Land might join with Katrice. Honestly, how anyone could call their kingdom that and keep a straight face is beyond me.’

Dorian leaned over me, lightly brushing hair from my face and trailing his fingers along my cheekbone. ‘It’s quite lovely, actually. Almost tropical. I mean, it’s no barren wasteland of a desert kingdom, but it’s not half bad.’

I was so used to his jibes about my kingdom that there was almost something comforting about them. His fingers ran down to my neck and were soon replaced by his lips. ‘Honestly, I’m not worried about this Honeysuckle place. It’s other potential allies worrying me. Hey, stop.’ His lips had moved down to my collarbone, and his hand was starting to lift my shirt. I wriggled away. ‘I don’t have time.’

He lifted his head, arching an eyebrow in surprise. ‘You have some place to be?’

'Yeah, actually.' I sighed. 'I have a job back in Tucson. Besides, I'm filthy.'

Dorian was undeterred and returned to trying to get my shirt off. 'I'll help bathe you.'

I swatted his hand away but then pulled him over so that I could put my arms around him and hold him against me. I knew he wanted more than cuddling, but I didn't have the energy. Considering his fastidious nature, I was surprised he consented to resting his head on my chest, seeing as how dirty and ragged the shirt was.

'No offense, but I'll take human showers any day over some servant lugging water up to a tub.'

'You can't leave without talking to Ranelle,' he pointed out. 'And you can't see her like this.'

I grimaced and ran my hand over his brilliant hair. 'Damn it.' He was right. I was still bad at this queen thing, but I knew enough about gentry customs to know that if I really did want the Linden King's help, I would need to look and sound good. So much to do. Never enough time. All so wearying.

Dorian lifted his head and looked back down at me. 'Was it bad?'

He was referring to last night's battle. 'It's always bad. I'm still not okay with people fighting and dying for me. Especially over one insult.' The living suffered from this war too. I often had refugees coming to me for food and shelter.

'Their kingdom's at stake,' he said. 'Their homes. And that was more than an insult. Letting it pass would make the Thorn Land look weak - like prey. It would make you open to invasion, which is the same as surrendering to Katrice. Your people don't want that. They *have* to fight.'

'But why do yours fight?'

Dorian looked at me like that was a crazy question. 'Because I tell them to.'

I left the conversation at that and called for a servant to fill the bathtub in the chamber adjacent to my bedroom. It was a tedious task I hated making them do, though Dorian would no doubt argue it was their duty to. The magic I'd inherited from my tyrant father gave me control over storm elements, so I could have summoned water straight to the tub, rather than making my servants haul it up one bucket at a time. The Thorn Land was so dry, however, that pulling that much water magically would both dry out the castle's air even more and possibly kill surrounding vegetation.

The servants had their own entrance to the bath chamber, and as soon as we heard them hauling and pouring water, Dorian grinned and pulled me back to the bed. 'See?' he said. 'Now we have time.'

I stopped protesting. And as our clothes came off and I felt the heat of his lips, I had to admit to myself that I wasn't averse to sex, not really. This war really did put our lives constantly at risk, and he had worried about me. Having me here, merging physically, seemed to reassure him that I truly was all right. And I took comfort in it too, being with this man I'd fallen in love with against all reason. I'd once feared and hated the gentry - and it had taken me a long time to trust Dorian.

Sex was surprisingly tame for us this time. Usually, we found ourselves caught up in bad, kinky sex, sex that was a game of power and control I both loved and felt dirty about. Now, I sat on top of him, wrapping my legs around his hips as I drew him inside me. A sigh of bliss escaped his lips, his eyes closing as I began to slowly move my body and ride him. A moment later, his eyes opened and held mine with an expression of such affection and lust that a chill ran through me.

It always amazed me that he found me so desirable. I'd seen his past lovers - sexy, voluptuous women with curves and cleavage reminiscent of classic Hollywood starlets. My body's build was lean and athletic from all the activity I did,

my breasts pretty nicely shaped - though hardly porn star quality. Yet, since we'd officially become a couple these last few months, he had never looked at another woman. It was me he watched, his gaze hungry even at the most unromantic times.

I increased my pace, tilting forward and rocking us so that more of my body rubbed against his, bringing me closer to orgasm. I came shortly thereafter, my lips parting without a sound as a sweet ecstasy wracked my body, and every nerve in my skin seemed to ignite. I leaned forward, kissing him, letting his tongue explore my mouth as his fingers stroked my nipples.

The door to the bath chamber suddenly opened, and I jerked my head up as a servant peered in. 'Your Majesty? The bath is ready.' Her words were bland, and she disappeared as quickly as she'd come. My being naked on top of Dorian hadn't seemed like any big deal to her - and probably, it wasn't. The gentry had much looser sexual mores than humans, public displays being very common. It probably would have been weirder for her if she *hadn't* found her monarchs immediately going at it upon my return.

This sexual ease wasn't something I'd picked up, and Dorian knew it. 'No, no,' he said, feeling me slow down in my shock. The hands cupping my breasts moved down to my hips. 'Let's finish this.'

Dragging my eyes from the door, I turned my attention back to him and found my arousal returning. He rolled me over, not holding anything back now that I'd come. He pushed his body into mine, thrusting as hard and fast as he could. Moments later, his body shuddered, his fingers digging in where he gripped my arms. I loved watching it happen, loved watching this smug, confident king lose his control between my thighs. When he finished, I gave him another long, lingering kiss and then slid over to lie beside him.

He exhaled in contentment, regarding me again with that mix of hunger and love. He wouldn't say it, but I knew he always secretly hoped that somehow, some way, our lovemaking would result in me getting pregnant. I had explained to him a hundred times how birth control pills worked, but the gentry had difficulty with conception, making them obsessed with having children. Dorian claimed he wanted a child just for the sake of having one with me, but the prophecy about my firstborn son conquering humanity had always been alluring. Obviously, I wasn't in favor of that idea - hence my emphasis on contraceptives. Dorian had ostensibly let go of that dream for my sake, but there were days I suspected he wouldn't mind fathering such a conqueror. As it was, our alliance already made us dangerous. He loved me, I was certain, but he also craved power. Our united kingdoms put us in a good position to conquer others, if we chose.

It was difficult leaving him, but there was too much to be done. I retreated to the bath, washing both sex and battle off of me. Life and death. The tub was only big enough for one, but Dorian seemed perfectly happy watching me and lounging in the afterglow. He was less excited about my wardrobe choice. As queen, I had a closet filled with elaborate dresses, dresses he loved seeing me in. As a human shaman, I'd also made sure it was stocked with human clothes. He looked at my jeans and tank top with dismay.

'Ranelle would be more impressed with a dress,' he said. 'Especially one that showed your lovely cleavage.'

I rolled my eyes. We were back in my bedroom, and I was loading myself up with weapons: charmed jewelry and an iron athame, along with a satchel containing a gun, a wand, and a silver athame. 'You'd be more impressed with that. And anyway, it'd be a waste now.'

'Not true.' He got up from the bed, still naked, and gently pushed me against the wall, cautious of the athame's

sharp blade. 'I'm ready again.'

I could see that he was, and honestly, I probably could have gone back to bed too. Whether that was from lust or a reluctance to fulfill my impending tasks, it was hard to say.

'Later,' I told him, brushing a kiss against his lips.

He regarded me suspiciously. 'Later means a lot of things with you. An hour. A day.'

I smiled and kissed him again. 'Not more than a day.' I reconsidered. 'Maybe two.' I laughed at the face this earned me. 'I'll see what I can do. Now get some clothes on before the women around here are driven into a frenzy.'

He gave me a mournful look. 'I'm afraid that'll happen with or without clothes, my dear.'

When we finally managed to part, I headed off toward Ranelle's room, my post-sex good humor fading. A little air magic left me with only semi-wet hair by the time I reached her. Once admitted, I found her writing a letter at her room's desk. Seeing me, she leapt up and curtsied.

'Your Majesty.'

I motioned her down and took a nearby chair. 'No need. I just wanted to have a quick chat before I returned to the human world.' Her face twitched a little at this, but ambassador training quickly moved her past how strange she probably found that. The ease with which I jumped worlds wasn't normal for gentry. 'I'm sorry for the grisly display this morning. And that I haven't been around much during your visit.'

'You're at war, Your Majesty. These things happen. Besides, King Dorian has been quite hospitable in your absence.'

I hid a smile. Ranelle was hardly in a frenzy, but it was clear Dorian had charmed her, as he did so many women. 'I'm glad. Were you writing your king?'

She nodded. 'I wanted to send him my report right away, although I'll be leaving later today.'

Magic filled the Otherworld and the gentry, and there were those among them with the power to expedite messages. A magical e-mail, of sorts. It allowed gossip to spread fast and meant her letter would get back to her homeland before she did. I eyed it on the desk.

‘What will you tell him?’

She hesitated. ‘May I be blunt, Your Majesty?’

‘Of course,’ I said, smiling. ‘I’m human. Er, half human.’

‘I empathize with you. I understand your grievance and know King Damos will too.’ She was carefully skirting the explicit details of Leith raping me. ‘But tragic as your situation is ... well, it is *your* situation. I don’t believe it’s one we should risk the lives of our people for - begging your pardon, Your Majesty.’ Delivering bad news obviously made her uneasy. My father, honorifically referred to as Storm King, had been known for his power and cruelty. I wasn’t as ruthless, but I’d had my share of frightening shows of power as well.

‘No offense taken,’ I assured her. ‘But ... if I may also be blunt, your king is in a precarious situation. He’s growing old. His power will eventually fade. Your kingdom will be open for others to move in on.’

Ranelle went perfectly still. The lands of the Otherworld bound themselves to those with enough power to claim them. ‘Are you threatening us, Your Majesty?’ she asked quietly.

‘No. I have no interest in another kingdom - especially one so far away.’ Distance was relative in the Otherworld, but the Linden Land did take a bit longer to get to compared to some of the kingdoms nearer to me, like the Rowan Land and Dorian’s Oak Land.

‘Perhaps not,’ she said uncertainly. ‘But it’s no secret King Dorian has wanted to expand his territory. That’s why he took you as a consort, right?’

Now I stiffened. ‘No. That’s not it at all. Neither of us have interest in your land. But your neighbors - or people

within the land itself – probably do. From what I’ve heard, Damos would like his daughter to inherit.’

Ranelle nodded slowly. Inheritance was by power here, not by blood – but most monarchs still longed for family succession, if they were lucky enough to have children at all. I gave Ranelle a knowing smile.

‘Her control of the land depends on her own power, of course. But if Damos helped us now, we could certainly help later against any ... usurpers hoping to claim the Linden Land.’

Assassination, outright war. The methods were less important than my meaning. Ranelle stayed silent, no doubt turning this over in her mind. Was a promise like that worth committing their armies to? Unclear. But it was certainly worth bringing to her king.

‘And,’ I added casually, shifting us from that dangerous topic, ‘I’d be happy to negotiate very favorable trade agreements with your king.’

By which I meant my staff would negotiate it. I *hated* economics and the politics of trade. But, my kingdom had literally and figuratively become a hot commodity. My shaping it in Arizona’s image had created harsh conditions – but also brought along tons of copper deposits. Copper was the chief metal in a world that couldn’t work with iron.

Ranelle nodded again. ‘I understand. I’ll bring this to his attention.’

‘Good.’ I rose from my chair. ‘I’m sorry I have to go now, but definitely let anyone here know if you need anything else. And send my greetings to Damos.’

Ranelle told me she would, and I left her, feeling rather pleased with myself. I disliked these sort of diplomatic talks almost as much as economic ones, mostly because I didn’t think I was very adept. But that one had gone well, and even if the Linden Land didn’t join us, I felt certain Dorian had been right: they wouldn’t fight against us either.

I was walking toward the castle's exit, intending to go to the nearest gate back to the human world, when I passed a certain hallway. I hesitated, staring down it as I waged a mental war. Then, grimacing, I altered my destination and turned the corner. The room I sought was easy to find because two guards stood outside of it. Both were Dorian's soldiers, chosen because if anyone was going to father the heir to Storm King's legacy, they wanted it to be their own lord. And everyone knew *I* was the mother he wanted, not the room's occupant.

One of the guards knocked and then opened the door slightly. 'The queen is here.'

I didn't need permission to enter any room in my own castle but still waited for a response. 'Come in.'

I entered and found Jasmine sitting cross-legged on her bed, attempting some kind of embroidery. Seeing me, she irritably tossed it aside. 'This is the stupidest thing ever. I wish the shining ones had more fun things to do. I wish I could go horseback riding.'

That last part was spoken with a knowing tone, and I ignored it. Jasmine was under house arrest, and I wasn't about to allow an activity that might let her slip her guards. I picked up the green velvet she'd been working on and studied her stitches.

'Goldfish?' I asked.

'Daffodils!' she exclaimed.

I hastily set it down. Really, considering the loose iron chains she wore on her wrists to stunt magic use, it was impressive that she could sew at all.

'I'm going back to Tucson,' I said. 'I wanted to check on you.'

She shrugged. 'I'm fine.'

Despite her young age, Jasmine had wanted - and still did want, I suspected - to be the mother of Storm King's heir. The prophecy hadn't been specific. It simply said his daughter's first son would be the conqueror. That made it a

race between the two of us - except I wasn't playing. Her forced stay here ensured she wasn't either. She'd hated me for this initially but had grown more civil after the war started. She considered Leith's actions an insult to our family. It was bizarre logic, but seeing as it had stopped her temper tantrums, I welcomed it.

'Do you ... need anything?' I asked. A stupid question to ask someone who wanted freedom.

She pointed to the iPod lying beside her. 'It needs charging again.' It always needed charging. Normal battery life aside, the Otherworld interfered with electronics. 'Books or magazines or something. I'd kill for a TV.'

I smiled. That one was out of my reach. 'Sometimes I would too when I'm here.'

'How'd it go with that Linden lady? Is she going to help us beat up Katrice?' Jasmine's moping face suddenly turned fierce. She had powers similar to mine, and while not as strong, they could still cause a lot of damage. If I'd let her loose, Jasmine would probably march right over to the Rowan Land and try to bring the castle down.

'I don't know. I'm not getting my hopes up.'

Jasmine's gray eyes turned calculating, making her seem wiser than her fifteen years should be capable of. 'As long as you and Dorian stay together, you're the badasses around here - especially you.' Surprisingly, there was no sneer as she said this. 'But you've gotta make sure Maiwenn doesn't join Katrice. You know she's thinking about it.'

Yes, despite her often pouty and childish attitude, Jasmine was smart. 'You're right,' I said. 'But thinking and doing are two different things. You said it yourself: Dorian and I are badasses. I don't think she's going to want to mess with us.'

There was something comfortable about being able to have a discussion with someone not using the gentry's formal language construction.

‘Probably not. But she’s scared to death you’re going to have our father’s heir.’ Jasmine eyed me carefully. ‘You haven’t changed your mind, have you? You and Dorian certainly do it enough.’

‘That’s none of your business,’ I said, wondering if that servant had already talked about what she’d seen in bed.

‘Tell that to Dorian. He brags about it all the time.’

I groaned, knowing it was true. ‘Well, regardless, I’m not having kids anytime soon.’

‘You should,’ Jasmine said. ‘Or let me. Katrice would totally back off.’

‘And then Maiwenn really would come after us.’ Maiwenn ruled the Willow Land and was very much against Storm King’s prophecy coming true. She also had a few other reasons for not liking my alliance with Dorian – or rather, her associates did.

‘Yeah,’ said Jasmine. ‘But you could still kick her ass.’

I rose and scooped up the iPod, putting it in my satchel. ‘Let’s stick to one ass-kicking at a time.’

An awkward silence fell. How odd that we’d just had a civil conversation. I’d grown up an only child, sometimes wishing I had a sister. The one I’d ended up with was hardly what I’d expected, but maybe I should be grateful for even this.

‘Well,’ I said at last. ‘I’ll see you soon.’

She nodded and picked up the velvet, scowling at it as though it had given her personal offense. I was almost at the door when she suddenly said, ‘Eugenie?’

I glanced back. ‘Yeah?’

‘Will you bring me some Twinkies?’

I smiled. ‘Sure.’

She didn’t look up from her embroidery, but I was almost certain she smiled too.

Chapter 3

I might have come to accept being queen of the Thorn Land, and it was hard not to grow attached to a place you had a spiritual connection to. Nonetheless, nothing the Otherworld offered would ever take the place of my home in Tucson. It was a small house, but in a nice neighborhood, near the Catalina Mountains north of the city. Gateways between the worlds existed all over, facilitating travel, but I had an 'anchor' in my home, meaning once I shifted out of the Thorn Land's gate, I was able to materialize directly in my bedroom. An anchor could be any object tied to your essence.

My roommate Tim, who hadn't seen me in a few days, was understandably shocked when I came strolling into the kitchen.

'Jesus Christ, Eug!' he exclaimed. He'd been flipping pancakes at the stove. 'We've got to put a bell around your neck or something.'

I grinned and had an inexplicable urge to hug him - though I knew that would freak him out even more. After all the craziness in the Otherworld, his normality was a welcome sight. Well, 'normality' might have been an exaggeration. Tim - with his tall, dark, and handsome looks - had taken to impersonating Native Americans (badly) in order to score chicks and make money selling his awful poetry. He rotated through various tribes, and last I knew, he'd been passing himself off as Tlingit, seeing as the locals got a little less pissed off by him donning the clothes of a

tribe living hundreds of miles away. He lived in my house rent-free in exchange for cooking and housework, and I was glad to see him dressed in an ordinary jeans and T-shirt ensemble today.

'Are you making enough for two?' I asked, heading straight for the full coffeepot.

'I always make enough for two. But most of it goes to waste.' That last part came out as a grumble. He'd once complained about being my 'slave' but missed my being around now.

'Messages?'

'Usual place.'

When in the Otherworld, I left my cell phone with Tim. It forced him to play secretary, something he resented since I actually already employed one. Indeed, most of the messages he'd scrawled on the refrigerator's white board were from her.

Tue. - 11 AM - Lara: two job offers

Tue. - 2:30 PM - Lara: one possible client needs ASAP help

Tue. - 5:15 PM - Lara: still wants to talk to you

Tue. - 5:20 PM - Lara: needs you to finish tax paperwork

Tue. - 10:30 PM - Lara: won't stop calling

Wed. - 8 AM - Lara: who calls this early?

Wed. - 11:15 AM - Bitch

Wed. - 11:30 AM - Sam's Home Improvement: interested in vinyl siding?

I admired his detailed message taking - frustration with Lara aside - but my heart sank when I saw who was conspicuously missing. Every time I came home, I secretly hoped I'd see their names up there. Sometimes, on the sly, my mom would check on me. But my step-dad, Roland? He

never called anymore, not after finding out about my allegiance to the Otherworld.

Tim, preoccupied with his cooking, didn't see my face. 'I don't get why she keeps calling. She knows you can't get any of her messages. Why does she need more than one? It's not like a billion of them are magically going to get through to you.'

'It's just her way,' I said. 'She's efficient.'

'That's not efficient,' he declared. 'It's borderline neurotic.'

I sighed, wondering not for the first time if I should just let messages go to voice mail. Despite having never met, Tim and Lara were mortal phone enemies. Hearing them bitch about each other was wearying. Nonetheless, staring at her string of calls already made me feel tired. I'd once had a brisk trade as a freelance shaman, kicking out ghosts and other annoying supernatural creatures who harassed humans. Now that I moonlighted as a fairy queen, I'd had to become much more selective with clientele. I could no longer keep up with the demand around here and felt bad about that. I suspected Roland was picking up my slack but didn't know for sure.

I waited until after breakfast before dealing with Lara. Pancakes, sausage, and coffee gave me the strength to deal with this latest batch of requests. Undoubtedly seeing my number on her caller ID, Lara didn't bother with formalities when I finally called.

'About time,' she exclaimed. 'Has he been giving you my messages?'

'He just did. I've been gone for three days. You know you don't need to keep bugging him about it.'

'I want to make sure he tells you I called.'

'He writes them down, every one. Besides, my phone's log also tells me you've called ... a lot.'

'Hmphf.' She let it go. 'Well, you're getting a lot of requests lately. I've thinned them out, but you've still got to

choose.'

It was almost February. We weren't near any major sabbats, when paranormal activity always increased. Sometimes, though, it happened for no reason. It figured now would be one of those times - right while I was in the middle of a war. Or, I realized, it might be happening *because* of that. My identities as queen and shaman were both well known among many creatures. Maybe they hoped they could get away with more while I was distracted. Half seemed to show up for selfish purposes in our world; the other half hoped to forcibly father Storm King's heir on me.

'Okay,' I said. 'Let's hear the priorities.'

'We need to finish your taxes.'

'That's not a priority. Keep going.'

'Single woman, stalked by a fetch.'

'That's serious. I'll have to get on that one.'

'Tree elemental. In your neighborhood.'

'Yeah, that one's here for me. He won't hurt anyone else.'

'Phantom-infested subdivision.'

'On a graveyard?'

'Yup.'

'Schedule it, and make sure the builder's charged double. Their own stupid fault.'

'Will do. Then you've got the usual weirdness. Lights in the sky. Possible UFO.'

'Was that Wil again?'

'Yes.'

'Damn it! Did you tell him it's just the military?'

'Yes. He also said there's been some Bigfoot sightings—' I froze. 'Bigfoot? Where?'

'I didn't get the details. I thought it was his usual craziness. And didn't you say they don't live in Arizona?'

'They don't. Has there been anything weird in the news? Deaths?'

There was a pause, and I heard the rustling of papers. 'Two hikers died over in Coronado, near the Rappel Rock trail. The report stated that they fell. Took a couple days to find their bodies. Nasty stuff. Some animals got to them.'

I was up and out of my chair in a flash, making the dishes on the kitchen table rattle. Tim, leafing through a magazine, looked up in alarm.

'Call Wil,' I told her, trying to tug on one of my boots while balancing the phone. 'Find out where he heard about these Bigfoot sightings. If it's not Coronado, give me a call back. If it is, no need to call.' Wil was Jasmine's half brother, and I avoided speaking to him when I could. One reason was that he always asked me about her. The other was that he was a crazy, paranoid conspiracy theorist. This time, he might be on to something.

Lara was understandably startled. 'But you said Bigfoot —'

'It's not Bigfoot.'

'Don't forget your other job tonight!'

'I won't.'

I disconnected and managed to get on the other boot. Tim regarded me warily. 'I don't like it when you get that look.'

'That makes two of us.'

He watched as I went to our hallway closet and produced a little-worn leather coat. 'You're going to Coronado?'

'Yup.'

'High?'

'Yup.'

He sighed and gestured to where we hung our keys near the door. 'Take my car. It'll handle better if you run into snow.'

I slung my satchel over my shoulder and flashed him a grateful smile. He warned me to be careful, but I was already out the door with the keys, heading for his Subaru.