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MAGIC'S DAUGHTER

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Dedication

Dedicated to my friend Rebekah.

You're dearly missed.

Kiira's love of horses is for you.

Chapter 1: Beaten

Today, in particular, tended towards savory in lieu of the typical sweetness of harvest. The brine of the sea hung heavy on the cool breath of morning, clinging to the air and in Kiira's lungs; the first signs of a typical humid and wet winter to come. Dreamy pastels of cornflower and poppy watered the dawn, promising a balmy day.

I can't wait for The Yielding Festival.

She smiled. The annual week-long celebration had all of Lorea reveling with towering bonfires, spiced meats, and flavored wines. This year had been deemed especially promising. It was to be the biggest harvest in seven years and had been the main topic of conversations for a month.

Kiira disturbed the earth with her toes simply for the sensation of feeling the coolness between them. The usually dense, smooth dirt of the training ring was cool and damp, numbing her bare feet.

"Stop daydreaming, Kiira," her brother Liem chided. "I have things to do."

"And I have new recruits to torture," Liem's best friend Folen added.

Leaning against the rough, sturdy wooden rails, she rolled her eyes before cuffing the sleeves of her tunic. "Relax, gentlemen. As usual, you will both be late for your appointments," she said, smoothing her braid and pushing an errant frizzy curl behind her ear. Her mocking tone produced a snort from her brother and a wry, unbelieving grin from Folen.

From her lower back, Kiira unsheathed dual twelve-inch bone-handled knives from the pliable leather corset cinched around her waist. Running her thumb and pointer finger along the flat of the blade, she focused her magic and the faintest sparkle of green added a layer of protection to the honed edge; the casting preventing injury but paralyzing the person whose skin it touched. It was an effective method for training. Any of them could

attack ruthlessly and injuries were minimized to ugly purple and yellow bruises. She couldn't, however, vouch for the injury it would do to Liem's and Folen's pride today when she won.

She released her control of the magic and felt the slightest parching at the back of her throat. Water would be her first stop after winning this duel.

Licking her lips, Kiira crouched into a carefully balanced stance, her muscles loose but tense and poised for action. She focused her attention on the two men opposite her, looking for weaknesses to exploit. They were both wearing darker clothing, making them more difficult to see in the early morning darkness. Clever. Kiira flipped her two blades with a practiced ease and smirked, teasing her opponents.

This is going to be too easy.

Liem and Folen didn't stand a chance. As much as they liked to think they had the advantage—two against one—she was the best knife fighter in the military. Both men were skilled, but neither had the drive for perfection she did.

Liem and Folen circled like vultures, and Kiira matched their movements, her strides long and easy. Unless she goaded them into attacking first, they would wait for the ideal opportunity. She had made the mistake only once of letting Liem and Folen surround her. The result left her paralyzed for a few hours and it was an experience she never wanted to repeat.

A hint of a smile crossed her lips as an idea came to mind and, easing her stance, Kiira dropped her guard, giving her opponents the sense of an easy mark.

Folen was the first to take the bait with a feint to her right. Liem moved from her left for what he likely thought would be an effortless takedown. Sandwiched, Kiira tucked her shoulder, rolling under Liem's guard and slicing his forearm with a quick, efficient stroke. The blade would have cut deep if not for her casting. He dropped, thudding against the compacted dirt in an ungainly position. If she didn't still have Folen to deal with, the shock on her twin's face would have been immensely satisfying. She would gloat later during the evening meal.

Kiira tumbled again, distancing herself from Folen.

Crouched and ready to face him—she waited. With Folen, patience was her advantage, since his strength couldn't match her lissome fighting style.

“Well played, my pearl, but you will not best me,” he taunted.

“Ah, but you forget, Folen, I am the best”—her tone was light with confidence—“and stop using your awful endearments on me. There is *nothing* between us.”

“You wound me, Petal,” Folen said, placing a fisted hand over his sternum in mock distress.

Kiira just managed to stop herself from rolling her eyes—again. Folen used the momentary distraction to jump forward, bringing down a pair of whistling blades toward her exposed arm. She whirled to his left, forcing him into a few unsteady forward steps, but he quickly corrected. His left hand swiping at her ribs, she blocking with her right, his strength testing the fortitude of her muscle. Magic crackled from the connected blades. She stabbed at his ribs, but he stepped and parried easily. They danced across the training ring—sometimes jumping over Liem—steel ringing against the silent morning and neither gaining the advantage. Flashes of green and amber sparked in the dull light each time their knives connected.

Kiira crouched into a spinning kick. Folen easily jumped, but she used the momentum to gain space. Her breaths—full and quick—added a light fog to the air in front of her. She narrowed her focus.

What is your weakness today?

The corner of her mouth ticked up.

The same as every other day.

Kiira again relaxed her stance slightly and he stepped, taking the bait. She could sense Liem trying mightily to warn his friend, but the paralyzing magic flooding his veins prevented him from doing anything other than breathing, blinking, and maintaining the casting on Folen's knives.

Folen took another wary step, the soldier in him cautious, yet pride making him unwilling to lose the advantage of a clear opening. Just before he was in striking range, Kiira softened her features and gave him an affectionate smile.

It had the desired effect.

Folen, solely focused on her demeanor, didn't react quickly enough when she stepped into his guard and sliced one knife down his forearm and the other across his neck. He landed in an ungainly heap at her feet.

Stooping, she clucked her tongue at him. "Folen, you are a hopeless flirt. You should not allow the charms of a woman to affect you so." She smiled and ruffled his hair. His eyes conveyed an amusing mixture of annoyance and pleasure at his defeat. "Worry not, the casting is subtle this time. The paralysis should wear off in an hour or so, just in time for the lads to see." Kiira winked and wandered over to her brother.

"My dear brother"—she grunted while straightening his body. She wanted to embarrass him, not leave him in pain from an awkward angle—"not one of your better days I'm afraid. You will have to tell me why when you can speak again. I'll see you at the evening meal!" Kissing her fingers, she gave him a light tap on the cheek and whistled a bright, happy melody as she jogged away.

* * *

The rays of a new day warmed her as they skimmed atop the castle's outer defense wall, a loving caress to her chilled skin. The plush grass tickled her feet as she glided with long strides in the retreating shadow. Kiira loved the thrill of a run, and this was her favorite place to experience the pounding of her heart and the rhythmic pattern of her feet as they connected with the earth. It was freedom. It was beautiful. Simple. Out here she didn't have to listen to the thumping of boots or virile grunting of thousands of soldiers training. Out here, next to the tan-stoned sentinel protecting her home, was hers.

Starting on the second lap, Kiira glanced back at the sound of additional footfalls interrupting her trance. She spotted Leo Moredell, the Earl of Wirlen, and her second in command. He was one of the few that, like her, appreciated the comfortable silence the thick stones provided. His long strides slowed to match hers momentarily before he gave her a taunting grin and pulled away, his long legs affording him an advantage. She frowned at his back, debating whether to increase her pace to outdistance him. Kiira took a cleansing breath. No, today she would just enjoy the clear air.

As she finished, the burn in her legs begged for the release through the Warrior's Dance. A small shiver rushed down Kiira's spine from a momentary breeze as she stopped at a crest on the land. The sun was well in the sky and the small hill afforded her a view several leagues outside the protective walls of the castle grounds, the distant glittering waters of Lorestan Lake winking against the breaking sun. The simple beauty was a love letter to her soul as bright tendrils of light kissed verdant fields. This view was why she chose to stretch here each morning.

Closing her eyes to focus, Kiira let deep, even breaths guide her through somnolent movements, gliding from one stance to the next. She used the time to meditate on the teachings of Windrah. Today she focused on a verse from her favorite paean.

*Your constant love reaches the heavens; your faithfulness
extends to the skies. Your righteousness is towering like
the mountains; your justice is like the depths of the sea.
We are in your care.*

"Good morning, Princess," Leo said, interrupting her thoughts as he trotted up beside her, an easy smile on his lips. His rich brown hair tufted into odd angles. "Did you enjoy your run this morning?"

"Good morning." Kiira finished her stretch and straightened. "Yes, I did. I thought to keep pace with you today, but decided your taunting was not worth the effort."

He laughed as he started his own routine of the Warrior's Dance. "I am glad to hear it."

A few moments of companionable silence followed before Kiira spoke again. "I will be working with the mounted archers today. They are still weak with reverse shots. This afternoon I would like to drill with unexpected targets, and also begin working the new recruits on close range combat. How many of the conscripts do you think will pass the testing?"

"Honestly," Leo said, "there is a good group this year. At least three quarters of them will do well, but they have only been here a week and much can change. We've certainly had surprises in the past."

Kiira couldn't argue. After a few moments of reflection, she returned her focus to Leo.

"For the close range practices, have the senior archers paired with the recruits; I want to be able to devise a training schedule based on skill."

When Leo finished his stretches, he and Kiira made for the private building belonging to the Archery Commander. Technically, it should be hers, but even a princess didn't need a castle suite and a two-room building, so she had passed it to Leo.

"We'll meet tonight after the evening meal in the library to discuss the training regimen. The last thing I want to do is drag myself down here again."

"Of course, Princess," Leo said with a smile. After a slight pause, he continued with less formality. "How did your sparring go this morning?"

"Wonderful!" she crowed, raising fists in victory as she spun to face him. Kiira gave him a triumphant grin before opening the door to Leo's comfortable study and living space. The smell of warm wood infused the air, inviting her to take a deep breath. Fisting either hip, a self-appreciating glint touched her eyes. "Liem was out in three moves. Folen gave me a fair fight, but he has a weakness for a pretty smile. I left them crumpled in a heap on the training ring."

"You're ruthless," Leo said, chuckling as he shut the door.

Once their privacy was assured, Kiira stepped into Leo's arms and gave him the most wide-eyed, innocent look she could muster, resting her hands on his muscled chest. "Only to those who think they are better than me," she said.

Leo chuckled and pulled her close. "My love, I would never dream of saying I was better than you; though I, too, am not immune to your pretty smile," he rumbled, hovering just above her lips.

"Then you have nothing to worry about," she teased, her eyes sparkling with playful affection.

An amused huff passed his lips before he kissed her soundly. Kiira leaned into him so as not to float away. This was her second favorite part of each morning.

The distant sound of conversation drifted through the cracked window. Kiira pulled away, wrinkling her nose at the disruption. Leaning back to absorb the desire in his earthen eyes, Kiira shamelessly soaked up every ounce of love she could see. These were eyes she wished to gaze upon for the rest of her life, and their secret needed to end. Stepping away, she played with the tip of her braid while she spoke. “Leo, you need to speak to my father soon. I have managed to keep recent inquiries at bay, but my influence will not last much longer. Father has been restless about my betrothal as of late, and it is not right to hide what is between us any longer.”

“I was planning on speaking with him during the week of the Yielding Festival. The King always seems to be in an agreeable mood during that time,” Leo said.

Kiira shook her head. “No, I have a gut feeling that time is running short. Please go to him tomorrow during Open Court.”

Leo studied her for a moment before staring at the wall.

“What’s wrong Leo? Why do you hesitate? Do you not—”

Leo stepped to her, cutting off her words. Running his fingers through the escaped curls of her hair, he cradled her tilted head. “Never doubt I love you, Kiira.” He kissed her. “If you believe it is the right course of action, I will go tomorrow.”

“Thank you Leo,” Kiira said, before brushing his lips with a kiss.

“No, I should thank you,” he replied, hugging her close. “You chose me.”

Chapter 2: Forgiven

Deep night lingered as day teased the horizon. Sleep smothered out most sounds save for a restless sea and a few happy crickets. Soon, a chorus of roosters would crow across the castle grounds and beyond, beckoning the world to wake. A whisper of a breeze twirled through white clouds, bringing with it the first signs of cooler temperatures and the beginning of yet another meager harvest.

A solitary candle flickered dimly, creating a wispy silhouette of Terren as he sat cross-legged on the open-air balcony attached to his rooms.

One breath in.

You make a way where there is no way.

One breath out.

Fog swirled in response to his deep, steady breaths. Droplets clung to his bare torso like a second skin.

Breath in.

You are provider and shield.

Breath out.

Reciting the words from chants he learned in the temple focused his mind and brought peace to his soul. Something he desperately needed each day since returning home. He relished this solitary time in the mornings.

Terren took in one last deep breath of the cool fog and exhaled before blinking his eyes open. It was light enough now he could define the edges of the utilitarian balustrade in front of him. Beyond, the sun's weak rays pierced the fog, casting the land in an ethereal glow. He stood in a fluid motion, resting his forearms on the railing to cast an appreciating eye upon the fresh day.

Tendrils of light darted through the misted morning, highlighting portions of the barren landscape to his left and right, where the flat fields meandered toward the sea, the highest reaches of the castle still shadowing the space directly before him. Dune grass bent severely as the breeze from the coast cleared, the fog wrapping the land. The brief moment of tranquility tipped his lips into a rare smile before thoughts of the coming day twisted them back into a laden frown.

Klynolia was a beautiful kingdom, and he had missed its simple beauty during his travels, but it was broken, more so than when he'd forsaken it twelve years ago. Before long, all shadows would scatter and reveal the truth. Magnificence lay deep in the heart of his kingdom, and he vowed to see it restored. The people deserved more than the hard living they knew. For now, he had to turn a blind eye, though it pained him.

Sighing, Terren stretched the stiffness from his muscles as he passed the threshold to the warm, dry interior of his suite. The two guards posted inside his room gave him a cursory glance before returning to their permanent expression of boredom.

They must feel punished for being assigned to protect me. Worst lie I've ever heard ... my protection.

Since Terren's return to the kingdom, the four-man guard had been his shadow, solely tasked to ensure he did not disappear again.

If only they knew how easily I could evade them.

The prospect was tempting, more often than he cared to admit. He longed for the freedom from princely burdens; yet this was the choice he made to dedicate himself to the well-being of his people.

I came back for them. My comfort is a small price to pay. I just pray I can ease their burden soon.

Sighing louder, he closed the door to his bath.

* * *

Eyes closed, Terren focused all of his energy on an imaginary opponent. Each envisioned stroke of the enemy sword was aimed to kill, giving him the incentive needed to respond appropriately. The wraith opponent in his mind's eye—broad and fierce—

equaled his skill with a sword. A worthy challenge. Often, he pictured the face of the king as he played out these mock fights, preparing for the day when his imaginary battles manifested. The king would have no qualms about killing him, and Terren refused to let futile loyalty stay his hand from doing the same.

He held a shoulder parry before swinging into a chest attack and slicing upward in a perfect arc to protect his head. Fluid and sure steps moved him through the small clearing as he danced with the invisible enemy. Stepping to the side to avoid an imagined thrust, his boot crunched an errant pinecone. His eyes snapped open.

'You should return soon,' Kamaria said within the confines of his mind, interrupting his swordplay. *'Your watchmen already think you take dreadfully long baths.'* Her distaste at the four-man guard simmered in the undercurrent of her emotions and echoed across their link.

Terren did not blame her for the sentiment. He briefly glanced at the sky to confirm her statement. Time had gotten away from him while he was here in the Shade Realm; the sun already brushing the points of the towering pine. At least in the Sun Realm, time moved slower. There it would still be early, but he had probably missed the morning meal.

Sheathing his sword, he walked over to where Kamaria, his massive Shade Bear, blended into the shadows of the forest. She was so still that only their intimate connection allowed him to know where she lay, otherwise he would have walked past her without a second glance. This camouflage was a Shade Beast's greatest asset.

He stood in front of her giant nose. Warm, moist breath washed over his entire body and flattened his hair. Craning to look into one of her large, opaque, black-and-grey-ringed eyes, he said, *'It is only for a season that you have to endure restrictions on our times together. If I could visit the Shade Realm every day, you know I would.'*

She chuffed. *'I know, but that doesn't mean I have to like the fact that you don't.'*

Terren gave a sad smile. He rested against her snout, burying his face into the prickly, grey-flecked fur. He sympathized with Kamaria's feelings, but Klynolia was

where he needed to be, and she knew his heart. His Bear would stick by him, despite her attitude.

Kamaria tilted her head. Smiling, Terren scratched the underside of her enormous snout. It didn't take long for a low, pleasant rumble to sound from the back of her throat. Her bitterness eased like the snow melts of spring. *'I at least have a few more minutes that I can relax with you,'* he reminded her.

Terren reclined on her giant paw, using one of her claws to prop his feet, and took deep breaths of pine as he sunk further into Kamaria's warm fur. He enjoyed the still moment. It was always like this with his Bear. Neither of them needed to talk or share emotions to be happy. They just were, and it was enough.

As the sun rose, light flooded the intimate clearing, only to be cut short by the broad trees dominating one another for space. His mother would have said the massive size of the forest was Gimetii's way of competing with his brother Liioh's enormous Beasts.

Terren preferred the Shade Realm. He liked the dark green prickly boughs and the rich brown of the flakey trunks. Birds chattered gaily and the distant sound of the sea filtered through the forest. It was similar to the Sun Realm, but here the land was raw and unspoiled by the selfishness of people. Here, the Shade Beasts, both wild and tame, ruled with undisputed power. Terren couldn't truly put into words his impressions of the Shade Realm, but whole seemed the best explanation. Centuries had barely changed its original design.

'Are you going to try again today?' Kamaria asked.

'Yes, just like I do every day,' he replied.

'Why do you persist with such a stubborn girl?'

'She is my sister.'

'That is not a reason,' Kamaria scoffed. A thin white cloud escaped her snout to punctuate her words.

Terren considered giving his reasons—again—but she would never grasp the bond he used to have with his sister and what he desired to have again. Kamaria understood

brothers and sisters in the sense of camaraderie. It was what she felt for her fellow Beast, but she would never understand his devotion. Instead, he replied, *'it is every reason.'*

There was a comfortable silence between them for a moment.

'When will I see you again?' She asked.

'In a few days.'

She huffed. An ache built in his chest as turmoil seeped across their link. He wished desperately to ease her heartache.

After a short hesitation, she asked, *'Yepenzi?'*

Terren smiled. It was an affectionate term that Kamaria used often. *'Yes, partner of my mind?'*

Jumbled feelings passed through their mental link as she attempted to explain her turmoil in the human tongue. Finally, she simply said, *'I love you.'*

'I love you too, Kamaria.'

* * *

Terren rapped on the door to Sairah's suite, ignoring the uncomfortable shifting of his guards. They were likely tired of the same routine each morning, but where he went, they went. How many more times would they have to witness his failure?

Ny, please let her answer today. I really want to make things right between us.

This was not the first time he had prayed the simple request. The looming, thick oak separated them. Errantly, he remembered something Naanel, his mentor at the temple, used to say. "Everyone who asks will receive, and anyone who seeks will find, and the door will be opened to those who knock."

If only.

Other than his first attempt, in which Sairah viciously shouted at him to stay away before slamming the door in his face, his sister had completely ignored his presence for the past three months. The icy disregard hurt, but wasn't unexpected.

Twelve years was a long time to be gone, and his sudden departure, with little more than a letter promising a return, did not inspire confidence. Rather than shielding a fragile ten-year-old from harm, he subjected her to the unpredictable demands of a tyrant, using

his own brokenness and self-centered longing for freedom as a flimsy justification. Looking at it now, the price of his freedom had been far too much. It ruined a relationship he treasured. Terren couldn't blame Sairah for holding a grudge.

He knocked again after his customary few minutes passed. A stir of footsteps sent a flicker of hope through his chest, even though the door would likely remain shut. Sairah was proud and strong, and would never approach him first, but she still loved him. He believed it in his soul. They were family. He just needed to coax it out of her.

He sighed. One day she will open the door, one day. The heel of his boot scraped against stone as the black barrier of thick wood ripped open to flood light into the hallway. A shadow—framed by the door—stood before him.

Sairah.

Terren let his vision adjust, and once he could see her lovely face, he smiled. Today she wore a pale lavender long-sleeved silk gown that hugged her willowy frame with understated grace. Accented with a silver circlet artfully braided into her long, thick black hair, she looked breathtaking as it fell in polished waves from a night's loosened braid. The back light of morning sun highlighted a few strands of red to complement the color of her tan skin and dress.

The firm set of her mouth and angered eyes could not diminish what a beauty his sister had become over the years. Sairah's expression should have been a clear message of her current frame of mind, except for the subtle curiosity. This is good, he thought, a step forward.

"What do you want, Terren?" Sairah asked, through hissing teeth.

"The same thing I wanted when I knocked on your door nearly three months ago. I want to talk," he said.

"Will you ever leave me alone?"

"No. Not until you let me speak my piece. Then you can tell me to permanently go away ... but even then I will still pursue you," he replied.

She scrutinized his face, looking for justification to keep him at arm's length. Finally, Sairah growled her disgust, but said, "I might as well talk to you, maybe then you

will actually take the hint since the slamming door was not enough”—she turned into the room—“this better be worth my time.”

Terren stepped through the door and stopped the two guards, attempting to follow. “No, you will stay out here.”

The captain shook his head. “I’m sorry, Your Highness, but King Grayten’s or—”

“I said no. You have my word I will not leave this room via any other means than this door, but you will not be present for this conversation.” The captain startled, yet a spark of respect in his expression shone through.

Good. Let them see I am not the timid prince they think.

It was a gamble letting the men see this side of him. Terren didn’t want to reveal too much too soon, but he hoped they would keep this amongst themselves. The captain nodded and stepped back.

He shut the door and gave all of his attention to his sister.

Sairah sat next to a small oval table with the remnants of her morning meal. She was poised save for the steady tap of a perfect nail against wood. Her flushed cheeks diminished some of the ire settled on her face. Terren took a moment just to memorize her.

He had seen her in dim light during a few scattered evening meals when Grayten required they dine with him, and in hurried passing in the hallway, but this was the first time Terren had a chance to see her in the full light of day.

She has grown so much.

Sairah favored their father with her square jaw and lighter skin, but the hair and eyes were directly from the Isokanii bloodline. Her edged curves were softened by femininity as if she had been carved from stone then polished smooth.

“Well? Say what you came to say and then get out.”

Terren cleared his throat. “Sairah, I shouldn’t have left you when I ran and for that I am sorry.”

She scoffed. “Save it, Terren, there is nothing you can say that will earn my forgiveness.”

He shook his head, eyes downcast. "I wish for your forgiveness, but do not expect it. I am only apologizing for my actions and my failure."

Sairah eyed him warily.

"I was selfish and failed at the one thing I promised mother; to protect you." He lowered his voice. "It is no excuse, but I was not in a good place emotionally when I left, I made a very poor decision because of it, and I know it caused you pain." Terren slowly raised his eyes to meet her gaze, silently willing her to understand the regret he carried. After several heartbeats of silence, he turned for the door.

Just as he touched the handle, Sairah hoarsely said, "Do you even know what happened to me? What your actions allowed for?"

"I could guess, but no, I don't actually know," Terren said quietly, facing her again.

"Let me enlighten you." She grimaced. "He had me tortured. Beaten till my bones broke and I was painted black and blue, all to coax you out of hiding. Did you even notice I wear long-sleeves in the heat of summer?"

Terren had.

A tear slipped down her cheek as she whispered, "My father." Swiping a hand across her face, she once again turned her cold wrath towards him. "Your excuses, Terren, are pathetic."

Every word burrowed into his skin, despite Sairah's tempered delivery. Terren pressed his lips into a thin frown. He hid his whitening knuckles beneath crossed arms and glared at nonexistent specks of dust.

I subjected her to that torture. My selfish actions. May the gods forgive me.

Snakes writhed in his gut. He fought against ideas of retribution toward the men who afflicted such evil upon Sairah, even if it was at Grayten's command.

But I am not my father and Ny expects better of me.

Terren would deal with the men responsible, but not with violence.

He took a deep breath to carefully compose his next words. "I was not naïve enough to believe Grayten would let you go unnoticed after my departure, and I'm not surprised he stooped as low as he did." Terren fidgeted his jaw a moment to harness the

guilt constricting his chest. “What you endured I cannot change. It devastates me more than words will express. Leaving Klynolia changed my life, and once I was in my right mind I deeply regretted abandoning you every day I was gone.”

“Then why did you never come back for me?” Sairah asked, her voice sticky.

Terren softened. He was ashamed to admit the truth, but she deserved to know. It was the least he could offer after discarding her to a madman. Quietly, he said, “I was afraid, Sairah. I wish something more dramatic to be the truth. Yet, even something impressive would never be able to paint me in a positive light. I plotted hundreds of ways to come back for you and what stopped me each time was fear.”

She sneered. “Then why come back now? Did the stars finally align enough for you to stop being a coward?”

The malice in her words was a slap to the face, but he wouldn’t let her see it.

Terren took a deep breath and, straightening his posture, he said, “For many reasons, but mostly I finally realized Grayten cannot hurt me”—she scrunched her face—“which you probably do not believe, given your experiences, but it is the true.”

Sairah cast a critical eye over him. “If you are not afraid of him, then why allow him to keep you under lock and key, hounded by guards even while you sleep? Why do you not confront him?”

“I want Grayten to think I am still afraid of him.”

“Why?”

“I will tell you someday, but not today.” Having spoken his piece, he wanted to give her time to digest all he said. Still facing her, but with one hand on the door, he added, “I hope you can find the grace to forgive me someday. I love you, Sairah, and I do not want a future without you in it.” The words were unceremonious, but honest. He turned to exit.

“Terren, wait,” Sairah whispered. He let go of the door and turned. Tears discolored her cheeks. She slumped in her chair, not looking him in the eyes. “I want”—she swallowed, flicking her eyes to him for a second—“I too want my brother ... promise”—

she sniffled—“promise me you will never abandon me again, and I can work at forgiving you.”

Terren took three long strides and gathered Sairah into his arms. He held her entire weight from the floor, cradling her head against his chest as she began to cry in earnest. “You have my solemn promise that I will never intentionally leave you again. I will do whatever it takes to protect you and shield you, even if it means my death.”

Muffled into his chest, she said, “Thank you.”

Chapter 3: Memories

Using the tip of his finger, he lifted the small white bud of the snowdrop away from the unmelted spring ice still covering the ground.

Loralyn would be thrilled to see them so early.

He'd taken extra care to make sure the hundreds of blossoms would thrive this time. After years of careful propagation, the perennial flowers finally surrounded the entire shack and grew down the hillside.

Every spring, the tiny white petals surfaced above the snow after a long mountain winter and filled him with both sorrow and happiness. Symbols of hope for warmer weather also reminded him of his loss. He'd planted them while mourning the death of his wife and unborn daughter. Choosing a different flower might have been better, but at the time of planting, all color had been washed from his world—it seemed appropriate. He could still recall the morning before he'd lost her.

“Zerrec,” she said with a hard thump between his shoulder blades. “Wake up you lazy man! The baby is moving.”

He lifted from the pillow, forcing his body into an uncomfortable arch. “What?” The sleepy question accompanying a smile. “Did the baby wake you? Is everything okay?” He asked, an arid throat making his words soft in the early morning. He twisted into a more comfortable position.

“Everything is fine. Here,” she said as she grabbed his hand to rest on her showing stomach.

The soft movement under his palm brought awareness to his sleepy mind. Zerrec smiled. Their child was moving! How wonderful to feel the promise of more under his fingers. He pulled a small portion of magic and used it to examine the child. The baby

was perfect. Ten tiny perfect fingers, ten tiny perfect toes, and he could “see” she had a button nose—just like her mother. Zerrec hoped their baby had her mother’s emerald eyes too, but he wouldn’t mind his stormy gray, either. Truly, it didn’t matter. After a few losses, they were going to have the most beautiful and perfect little girl. Zerrec offered a pleased grin to his wife.

Loralyn smacked him playfully. “You cheat. You know the gender! We were supposed to keep it a surprise!”

“How could I not know? I have to make sure everything is perfect.”

Loralyn’s eyes sparkled with tenderness.

They sat in silence for a time until the baby stopped moving. Zerrec groaned, flopping onto his back. “I might as well get an early start on the garden, but I would much rather stay here with you.”

“Ha! You would rather not tend the plants at all!”

Plants were her passion. Thick heavy vines crowded every corner of their one room home in the mountains; keeping the normally thin air so thick he could almost quench his thirst. The plants flourished because of Loralyn’s core gift of Nature. Zerrec clasped his wife’s left wrist and brushed soft strokes across the faint magician’s mark below her palm.

“True, but my duties are only temporary.” Being forced to take it easy—his orders—was driving her mad, but he wouldn’t endanger her or the baby, not when he could do something about it. Her bed rest would be worth every second when they could hold their little girl for the first time.

“You could let me—”

“No, Lora. We’ve already talked about this. Rest is the only thing keeping you from losing this child,” Zerrec said with firm, sure words. “I’ll not see us lose another.” Even his Blood magic couldn’t save their last child and it had broken both of them.

She sighed. “You’re right. At least give me something to do. If I cannot move around to tend the plants, give me something I can do here.”

His wife's pleading melted his stubbornness. "The garden looked a bit sad yesterday. How about you make a tonic to liven the plants?"

Loralyn beamed. She knew he was pacifying her, but at least she had a project to take most of the day. "I'll need a leaf from each of the plants, my jars, and water."

Zerrec placed a savoring kiss on her knuckles. "I shall return, my lady, with the bounty of our garden and the other requested items post haste!"

She snorted. Pulling her hand from his, she said, "be gone you love-sick fool, or I shall punish you for taking so long."

He wobbled, pulling on a boot. "Oh! My lady, you wound me. You know I am a most loyal and faithful servant"—he pulled at the other boot—"what punishment is there for such a person?"

Loralyn gave him a mischievous smirk. "I shall force you talk to the plants!"

Zerrec fisted a hand to his heart and stumbled toward the door. "My lady, such a wound I could not recover from."

His wife's soft laugh touched his ears as he closed the door. He smiled, knowing he'd lightened the heaviness weighing on her.

Zerrec's knees crackled as he stood from his crouched position. That memory was lifetimes ago and plants were the only thing left in this world connecting him to his two loves. Soon the snow would melt to reveal Privet, Holly, and Dogwood shrubs he planted in his Loralyn's honor. They would hide the worn wood planks forming the walls of his home. Loralyn would be proud of his garden. A man without a natural green thumb or Nature Magic to assist his efforts.

He'd lost everything when she and their child died in the breaking, but at least his hope wasn't wholly gone. Zerrec wandered over to the large patch of tilled soil where he'd planted orange peonies to remind him of what he had—Kiira. Closing his now sapphire eyes, he almost felt Kiira next to him, with her emerald eyes and wide smile, a copy of his Loralyn. He missed his new love each day, and he hoped to see her again. At

least when the Peonies blossomed, they would be a bright reminder of the princess' vitality, enthusiasm, boundless creativity.

When he'd planted the orange flowers, a wish took residence in his heart for his core magic to be Nature so he could make the blossom grow large and as fragrant as she. The desire promptly left him. If he'd been gifted with another magic, his life could never have been sustained this long and he never would have met Kiira. Instead, he would have wasted his life pining for what was lost and broken, only to die miserable and alone.

Kiira gave him hope.

Though, with ten years of distance since I last laid eyes on her, my hope dwindles a little more each spring.

Zerrec considered unearthing his scrying crystal from beneath the floorboards to glimpse his former pupil and love. Anything to feel closer to her—to feel as if she was near. He shook his head, releasing the foolish idea. It would only increase his longing.

A spring wind sent him inside for warm tea. Crunching through the snow, Zerrec knew one day he would have Kiira. One day he would hold a child with emerald eyes and he could restore a life lost. He just needed to be patient.

One day.

About the Author



T.J. Fisher is the author of *The Broken Realms Chronicle*. As a former mermaid, T.J. is a lover of all things fantastical and magical. After decades of watching humans write stories about her kind; she joined the fray and added her knowledge of magic to give characters a ‘breath’ of fresh air—so to speak. Lured to land by the love of a halfling and his endless supply of delicious culinary creations; T.J. now dines on the delicacies of enchiladas, breakfast tacos, milkshakes, and chocolate chip cookies. She may have lost her fins, but she still loves water in all forms.

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