

Liberty University

The Fire Behind My Passion:

Thief's Fire

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Table of Contents

Abstract	Page 3
Artist Statement	Pages 4-11
Critical Research Paper	Pages 12-25
Works Cited	Pages 26-27
Annotated Bibliography	Pages 28-33
Thief's Fire	Pages 34-124

## Abstract

Every day, I am bombarded by vulgarity of every kind through the people around me, the television, music, and sadly literature as well. The fantasy genre is a genre that is filled with made-up worlds and creatures that come from the awe-inspiring human imagination. However, it is not untouched by the vulgarity of this world. Fantasy novels have become just as filled with foul language and sex as the so-called “trashy romance” novels have in them. What is most disturbing about all this is that the vulgarity has leaked into the fantasy novels made for teens. I aim to create pieces geared toward adults that wouldn’t expose young people to anything vulgar. If my students come across my writings one day and pick them up, I don’t want to be embarrassed by the content they might be reading. I want them to enjoy it and be able to get something out of it. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are exceptional writers who I hope to emulate. I might never reach their writing style or fame, but I want my writing to be as powerful as theirs. I want my writing to be able to be read by teenagers and adults alike.

### Artist Statement

Fantasy fiction is my favorite genre. It is a genre where I can build a new and fantastic world filled with anything my heart desires. However, my favorite part is one theme that is so common in fantasy: good vs. evil, light vs. dark. Writing in fantasy has given me so much freedom to bring to life the worlds, characters, and creatures I have long dreamed of and pictured in my mind and share them with the world. Bringing the characters alive on the page for my readers to fall in love with and follow along on their journey as they battle not only the outside forces that are trying to destroy them but also as they fight themselves is something I enjoy doing. I love it when someone relates to a battle that a character of mine is fighting within themselves and can see themselves in my characters.

There have been many worlds that I have created in my mind over the years ever since I was a child. Some I have let go as I have grown both in age and as a writer. Others, I have built upon the images and thoughts rattling around in my brain for so long. My passion for these stories keeps me writing and going to school even though I work full time and have a disease that causes me to become sick, often zapping what little energy I have left after work. My passion for writing and the drive to share that passion with others drives me to continue and push through to the end.

The first piece that I have wanted to be able to do that with is *Thief's Fire*. *Thief's Fire* is a piece that has long been in my heart to write and growing increasingly in my mind. I started working on it a few years ago and continued it once I started my Masters in Creative Writing. My desire to write this particular style of novel was to have something that not only pulled people into a world they could get lost in but also to write a book that did not have any foul language or sex in it that was geared toward adults in the fantasy section. I am an avid reader of

all things, but fantasy is my favorite genre. I love being pulled into someone else's imagination and seeing what they designed. Seeing their worlds, creatures, and characters is something that I immensely enjoy; however, it has become more and more difficult to find a novel to read in the fantasy genre for adults that does not have foul language or sex in it. With the struggle of finding a fantasy novel that was geared toward adults that did not have sex or vulgar language in it becoming a bigger and bigger problem, I decided that I would work on fantasy books that would be for adults but not have all the junk in it for those that did not want to have to be exposed to it.

To dive into the fantasy genre as a writer, I prepared by reading different forms of fantasy novels, both Christian and non-Christian. Everything from J.R.R. Tolkien to J.K. Rowling grabbed my attention. I wanted to immerse myself in different styles of writing, authors, and worlds created to get an idea of what needed to happen to bring my magical world alive. I found with the fantasy genre; I had a lot of freedom. I would be the creator of a world, people, language, or whatever else I wanted to create. It was both liberating and scary. To not have to be bound by any rules of this world was fun and freeing, but knowing that I would have to explain everything that happens in my world so my readers would know what was going on was very panic-inducing. I needed to work on my confidence as a writer to help with the panic and stress that came with creating a world out of nothing.

All my free time outside of work is dedicated to improving my writing abilities, whether reading others' works or reading books that give tips on becoming a better writer. One of the things I have done to help with my confidence and hopefully help my work is to get a lot of books that cater to supporting writers in many different ways. I have books that cover several topics to help writers become the best they can be. I have gotten workbooks for fantasy writers that help lay out everything a fantasy novel needs. Writing out everything step by step before I

begin the writing process, the panic fades, and my confidence in my writing and world grows. The growth of my world and novel through my notes allowed me to feel confident enough to begin the actual writing process of my first novel.

*Thief's Fire* is the first book in a trilogy called the Fire trilogy. It is a story with Fae, Witches, humans, and one surviving Half-Elemental. It revolves around the main characters: Falon, her mate or destined spouse-Aidan; her best friend, Ariana, and Ariana's mate Cale. The story has an intricate backstory that comes out in the novel as the characters learn more about it themselves. A thousand years before my story began, there was a war between two sides. The Fae, who Damian led, and the Witches, who Micah led, joined with the Humans to fight against the Elementals, led by Falon's father, Ezekiel. What everyone was led to believe was that the Elementals were out of control and they needed to be wiped out and destroyed.

However, the leader of the Fae, Damian, had been making it look like the Elementals were out of control to bring everyone together to fight against them. He knew he was not strong enough to defeat them on his own, and for his plans of complete domination to work, he had to eliminate the Elementals. The Elementals kept the balance between all of the beings. They were the peacemakers. After all of the Elementals were destroyed, or so everyone thought, Damian showed his true colors and took dominion over all of the beings, with Micah being his second in command. Over the next thousand years, things got worse and worse for every being. Anyone who stands against Damian is imprisoned, turned into enslaved people, or executed. A group begins to fight back, forming a community with all the beings living in harmony hiding in the mountains. They built a fantastic community over the years and developed a council with Fae, Witches, and Humans that helped govern the people in the community peacefully. Their home

becomes known as Thief City. They are a constant thorn in Damian's side, who is determined to see the city and its people destroyed.

As my story begins, the reader is with Falon in a meeting with Thief City's council, even though they do not know who they are, and they are getting ready to send her on a mission. After receiving her orders, she meets her partner and best friend, Ariana, at a Tavern in the Witch Town, where Falon and Ariana's mission needs to happen. Falon and Ariana have frequented this tavern and have become a little protective of the humans running it. The story is in the third person, following Falon on her journey most of the time through the first book; however, as Aiden, her mate, shows up in the story, the story follows him as well. Most of the second book follows Aiden rather than Falon.

The meeting with Ariana in the tavern starts the ball rolling on the whole story of *Thief's Fire* because it brings in Falon and Ariana's mates. Their mates are vital to the story, especially Falon's mate. Aiden becomes essential to helping Falon heal from all the trauma she has gone through in her life and helping her find out who she truly is and is meant to be. He helps her accept everything about herself and step into her powers instead of being scared. Aiden helps her to open up her heart and learn how to trust, while Falon helps Aiden learn how to love and smile. Aiden is the son of Damian and has his demons to fight. The two are brought together and can overcome many obstacles thrown their way. One of the things I like about my story is that it is not just about a journey and war happening on the surface. Still, it is also about the struggles people face within themselves and what they must overcome to accept themselves and others. The story is about a battle between good and evil and the fight within oneself. Falon has to fight with herself to have a relationship with those around her.

*Thief's Fire* and *the Fire Trilogy* is not just me bringing the world inside my head alive, but I am bringing my imagination onto the page for others to read. I hope my readers will fall in love with my characters and follow their journey as they grow and learn from all they go through. This book is the first story I brought to life on the page, and I want others to fall in love with it as much as I have. I want it to bring people into a fantasy world that is unique and exciting.

While I am an avid reader of all genres, I became passionate about writing in fantasy because I needed to find an escape from reality for so long. Having suffered from illness since I was thirteen, books and writing have always been my means of escape from what is going on in my life physically. Creating worlds and characters helped me to deal with the pain, sickness, and sadness I went through. Some days, after work, I am so drained and in so much pain that hanging out with my friends or family is impossible, so I write. Writing became my way of forgetting my troubles and diving into a world that was not my own. I could pour my pain and anguish into the words on the page and even put my hopes and dreams into my characters.

I love my job and working with my students. The older I get, the more of a struggle it is for me to work with my illness. I know one day I might have to work from home, which as a teacher, is heartbreaking. However, if that were to happen, I wanted something I could do. I decided to do the Creative Writing program to improve my writing skills. I wanted to have more doors available to me in the future, and since writing is a passion of mine, I wanted to have the skills I needed to become an author one day. It might never come true, but it will not be by lack of trying or because I needed to take the time to learn the skills.

Another thing I am passionate about is creating a piece that anyone could pick up and read. I hope anyone can read my story and enjoy the content without dealing with all the garbage



in some other fantasy novels. Fantasy novels such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, or C.S. Lewis's works are fantastic pieces that have touched the lives of so many throughout the years since their inception. They are pieces that focus on the journey of their characters and the battle between good and evil, light and dark. These books are pieces that I would not mind my seventh graders picking up and reading because they are free of language and sex, and underneath they have potent messages to teach those who open their pages. However, nowadays, not many fantasy novels are being made that are as clean and powerful as the works of the authors mentioned above. So many have sex scenes, graphic a lot of the time, and foul language. Some still choose not to have those things in their works or at least minimal language and no sex, but it is getting to the point where there are fewer and fewer of those kinds of writers in the fantasy genre.

I want to be a writer who tries to live up to the legacy left by the brilliant authors mentioned. I do not believe I will ever measure up to them, but I want my work to have a message to those reading it and to be free of foul language and sex scenes. I want anyone to pick up my book and be able to read it and not be worried about what they are going to find inside. Teaching seventh graders has made me want to set a good example for my students more than ever before, and I don't want to be embarrassed or feel like I am setting a bad example if my students find my book one day and read it. I want them to see that the example I am setting is different from what they are shown daily by others around them and by the entertainment they see all the time. I might not be able to witness to them publicly because of laws, but I can be a light and example to them through my writing, the way I act around them, and how I speak. I want every aspect of my life to shine the love and light of Jesus Christ, even if I'm not allowed to share the gospel at work.

While, at the moment, my writing is geared toward adults, I want to make a series for middle school-aged students. My students are always complaining about how there need to be more books out there for them. They are either too young for them or way too old. I want to create a series that my students would enjoy, and that is clean of any vulgarity. One series that I have enjoyed that is geared toward middle school-age students is the *Percy Jackson* series. I have several students who have enjoyed it as well. I would love to create several types of fantasy novels for my age-level students that will pull them into magical worlds that will entertain and amuse them but also be wholesome.

Just like how I put my heart into my teaching career, Christian beliefs, and Faith, I also put my heart into my writing. I pour my heart and soul into my writing and write a little daily. It is a way for me to relieve stress and get the worlds that are building inside of my head out and the words that rattle around daily in my mind onto the page. I have characters that sometimes scream to get out onto the page and tell their story, and if I do not let them out, I can sometimes become overwhelmed with the ideas and thoughts running around in my brain. I have been writing, planning, and working on Thief's Fire and other works for a long time.

I decided to take this Master's program to gain the confidence I needed to follow through and put my stuff out there. I want my work to be enjoyed by others, but I want the confidence to let others read it and feel like it is worth something. Even though I like my work, I always second guess whether it is good enough for others to read or whether or not they would enjoy reading it. I tell myself all the time that this is just a hobby, and it is something I do to help myself with the stress of being a teacher after a long day of working with seventh graders. However, I want it to be different. I want to be confident and proud to share my work with others, and I want to show that my work is not just about the fantasy world I have created but

also about overcoming obstacles and learning to love yourself no matter what you have gone through. I want my work to touch others and for them to love the worlds I have created.

## Critical Research Paper

Modern fantasy has become a popular genre over the past ten years or so. At one time, it was seen more as the genre for geeks and nerds, but now everyone is interested in some form of the genre. Many authors made the genre famous such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, Rick Riordan, Robin Hobb, Neil Gaiman, Lewis Carroll, and so many more that there is a style of writing in the fantasy genre for everyone to enjoy which is why it is appealing to so many different types of people. However, to understand modern fantasy, you have to know what modern fantasy is. So, what is modern fantasy? According to *Children's Literature*:

Modern fantasy has 'story elements that violate the natural, physical laws of our known world—events akin to magic...Some miraculous elements found in modern fantasy is talking animals, imaginary worlds, fanciful characters, magical beings, and so on. Some types of modern fantasy include the following: toys and objects imbued with life, tiny humans, peculiar characters and situations, imaginary worlds, magical powers, supernatural tales, time-warp fantasy, and high fantasy (Tunnell).

This definition opens the mind to many possibilities that an author could pour out onto the page and become a part of the modern fantasy genre. The modern fantasy genre has made many leaps forward throughout its inception. The twists and turns in this genre have allowed writers to take certain liberties when writing a piece that can be categorized in the modern fantasy genre. However, have these twists and turns created certain freedoms in this genre that

should never have taken place? Sex and foul language have become blights in the Modern fantasy genre that do not help the imagination flourish as it was meant to but rather hamper it and pull people back into the reality they are trying to escape.

Foul language is “expressions such as swear words regarded as coarse, obscene, or otherwise unacceptable in polite or formal speech” (Oxford English Dictionary). By the definition provided, foul language is otherwise unacceptable in polite or formal speech; it is unacceptable at schools, most workplaces, and formal situations, yet it is something that is put into some fantasy genre novels excessively. Foul language is not just found in adult novels any longer, but it is also placed in teenage books as young as fourteen. The use of foul language in novels has been used often in stories; however, it is not just the use of it that is the problem; it is the excessive use. Such language pulls the reader out of the imaginative worlds that the writers have painstakingly created and jars them back into reality. A reader immerses themselves into a fantasy novel to escape reality, to live a life other than what they are living at the moment. Having to constantly be pulled out of that new world that the reader has wrapped themselves up in by foul language interrupting the storyline can be extremely hindering to the escape the reader wishes to experience. It is significantly hindering for the younger readers who sometimes only have the fantasy world to escape into, unlike the adults who have other means of changing their realities.

While not everyone is blessed with an imagination that allows them to create their worlds in their minds, everyone can pick up a book and begin reading the words another has written. Those who can not create their world need the writer’s words from a novel to pull them into the world that the author created. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines imagination as “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly

perceived in reality.” The fantasy genre revolves around the imagination and the pull away from reality. It is one of the beautiful things about the genre. Brian Godawa, in *The Imagination of God*, states:

The word image is a root word of imagination, which scholar William Dyrness defines traditionally as ‘the ability to shape mental images of things not present to the senses.’ So the category of image might include anything that engages the imagination rather than the rational intellect.

If imagination focuses the mind on things not present to the senses, why would authors want to muddy it down with pieces of reality like foul language and sex that pull the reader back into reality and not keep the reader grounded in the worlds the authors created for the reader to escape into? The fantasy genre should be an escape from reality and a leap into the imagination.

The imagination is such an important thing to the daily lives of everyone. Even those who say they lack imagination in some way have a bit of an imagination. According to Malcolm Guite:

The power of imagination does not just come into play when we make up stories, it is the imagination that allows us to grasp the whole, the meaning, the pattern in what we perceive, the draw the lines that connects the dots, to glimpse the pattern that suddenly makes sense of disparate and apparently random things. It is by forming and

perceiving power of imagination that the constant stream of data flowing into us through our minds is shaped into a tree, a mountain, a sunset, the face of our beloved.

The purest form of the imagination is what shapes how people perceive the world. The more the imagination is tainted, it is logical that the way people see the world will also be tainted.

The fantasy genre is built upon pure imagination from literally the ground up. The writers must design the very foundation and worlds the characters live upon. The readers' imaginations are stirred from the very beginning as they have to imagine all these different places, creatures, and characters the author has created. If the book is tainted by vulgarity, the wonderful world the author has spent so much time creating will start to become tainted as well as the reader's imagination of this new world.

Fantasy and imagination are two sides of the same coin. People can't have one without the other. Without an active imagination, there would be no fantasy; without an imagination, any person would not truly see the world. Without imagination, no one could see the beauty in the world around them. Fantasy and imagination lead humans to build and create wonderful things, allowing them to see the world in marvelous ways. However, it can also lead people into a panic as they allow their minds to run away with themselves. Jack Zipes, in his article, "Why Fantasy Matters Too Much," starts by stating this:

It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason. Reason matters, but fantasy matters more. Perhaps it has mattered

too much, and our reliance on fantasy may wear thin and betray us even while it nourishes us and gives us hope that the world can be a better place. (Ziper)

Fantasy and imagination are essential in the world to better understand it and to make sense of what is happening. How imagination and fantasy have been shaped is a big part of how a person will perceive the world around them. How it is shaped is what will be born out of not only by the author but also by those who take in those pieces the author has provided for entertainment.

Guite brings up many things about imagination in his book *Lifting the Veil*. He states, “The work of imagination is a kind of birthing, a gift of living imaginative form, the making of something that will have its own life and growth and history after the artist has passed on” (Guite). If imagination is “a birthing” of sorts, then what writers bring into this world is just as important as how parents bring up their children. How parents raise up their children doesn’t just affect the children’s immediate family but everyone those children will one day come in contact with. How ever they were raised will cause them to either affect or infect everyone around them. Just as important as parents raising their children, it is important for writers to look at what they are putting on the market for others to read and at what age they are saying it is for. While it is everyone's right to read what they desire, it is also the author's responsibility to put age restrictions on their work when they are unsuitable for the younger audience. Authors need to learn to consider what impact their vulgarity could have on the younger generations.

Over the years, there has been research showing the effect foul language, sex, and violence have on children and teenagers who have been exposed to these three things repeatedly. Justin Coulson, in his article “The Problem with Exposing Kids to Sexual and Violent Content,”



states, “like a drug, the more violence or sexual content we take in, the more of it we need to get the same shock factor.” His article breaks down how many studies showed that the more children and teenagers were exposed to these things, the more they were “desensitized” to the things around them and how all of this “led to a reduced willingness to help someone who was in pain.”

The longer people go being exposed to sex, foul language, and violence, the more they are unaffected by the things they see in their everyday lives. It becomes harder, especially for children exposed at an early age, to show empathy, leading to a decay of morality. It is not just movies and television that need to be watched for these things, but books. Books expose younger children to something they would not have been exposed to just ten years earlier. With the breakdown in morality happening at an alarming pace and the lack of empathy people already show as a whole, do people really need one more thing that can cause these things to take place? Most of society understands the rating system of movies and television shows, but do those same people know that there isn't one for novels? If exposing the children to too much vulgarity is a problem society needs to look at then people need to first understand the problem at hand.

Alexandra Sifferlin's article “Profanity in Teen Novels: Characters who Curse are Often Most Desirable” brings up the fact that if the amount of language that was in some teen books that were geared toward ages fourteen and up were in movies, they would have to be rated R. She goes on to state, “according to the Motion Picture Association of America, a single use of the ‘F-word’ in a film gives it a PG-13 rating. More than one use requires an R rating, and an adult must accompany children under age seventeen to view the film.” It is ridiculous that they have a rating system like this for movies and television, but they don't for books. Books are not monitored, and novels are slipping through the cracks.

There is not a lot of research of the effect a lot of language, and sexual content in novels has on people in general. Some stories have up to five hundred swear words, some of which are sexual, and it is labeled for fourteen and up. While some websites try to give you an honest review of what is inside books, especially those geared towards children and teens, there is not a lot of research or help regarding the monitoring process like there is for movies and television. Very few people seem interested in learning how overexposure to these things, not only with what they are exposed to in everyday life but also what they are exposing themselves to in entertainment, affects them in the long run. Society, as a whole, needs to look at what all the sex and foul language the younger generations are exposed to does to them.

Letting teenagers read fantasy novels or any novel with such vulgarity can cause them to aim to be like characters that are not the best example. Alexandra Sifferlin continues in her article by stating:

The researchers were also interested in who was cussing. They found that when profanity was used, the characters were most likely to be young rich, attractive, and of high social status. 'A lot of research has shown that viewers tend to imitate the characters with desirable characteristics,' says Coyne, 'if adolescents are reading about these characters who are popular and rich --- which are desirable characteristics for them --- they are likely to imitate their behavior.' (Sifferlin).

Teenagers want to fit in, be popular, and be famous. When they read these books and the ones using such foul, coarse language and doing these sexual acts are the rich kids, popular kids who seem to have it all, it isn't surprising to see them start to emulate them.

Modern fantasy has had many ups and downs since its inception. What it once started as is not all it is any longer. While there have been some creative and imaginative changes for the better and amazing authors that have joined the ranks of great fantasy writers. As many ups as there have been in the fantasy genre, there have been downs. The fantasy story that revolved around a journey where the main character was changed by all they saw and experienced has shifted from a purer form to a form that has a lot more sex and foul language in it.

As the years have progressed, the Modern fantasy Genre has begun to revolve more around the sex scenes and relationships of the characters than the action or plot line. It is becoming such a problem that it shows up in Young Adult and Teenage fantasy novels, not just Adult novels. It seems that more and more are gone from the days of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's books revolved around the fight between good and evil. Tolkien's novels might have had a lot of fighting and action, but it was free of sex and foul language that stains the pages of many books today. Sam Gangee, from the *Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, stated, "There's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo...and it's worth fighting for," and there is good in this world; it is just hard to see through all the filth sometimes. Vulgarity has become very common in today's society that; books intended for young teenagers are not monitored and are allowed to have anything in them.

An example of a book series geared toward teenagers as young as thirteen is the *Vampire Academy*. Even those these books are labeled for thirteen and above, they are filled with foul language, bullying, and talk of sexual situations, along with some situations that are very sexual.

It might not be as explicit as adult fantasy novels, but it is still unnecessary in a book series. It is especially not needed when you are dealing with young teenagers. Teenagers are exposed to so much on their phones, the tv, and just being around people. Why do they need to be exposed to more in what they read? What is the purpose of putting those things in there?

While sex and foul language are not new in literature, the amount and age that is allowed to read it is new. Although sex has appeared in many types of literature throughout history, it has been limited to specific age groups and even, at one point, hidden in sock drawers or banned. The rise of Christianity stopped many of the old myths that celebrated the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses that liked to have multiple relationships with not only each other but with mortals. The rise of Christianity brought about a more pure time in literature for a while.

Many writers would use the fantasy genre to create a world that allowed them to express their Christian beliefs through symbolism. George MacDonald, the author of *Phantastes*, is one such author who used symbolism in his writing to create a world that allowed him to express his beliefs through a fantasy world. At the same time, many people argue that J.R.R. Tolkien's writings are the beginning of the modern fantasy genre. George MacDonald started the modern fantasy movement, and he started it with something that involved a young man going on a journey and finding himself through the journey. His pure writing led to authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis' pieces built worlds that enticed the imagination and followed the characters on a journey that would be life-changing for them. Each of their stories had a fight between good and evil that resonated with everyone who picked up their books and read their pages. It lets readers know that even though this was a fantasy world, they struggled with a battle within themselves just as much as the readers do daily. Their books inspired

generations of people and still do every day. It did not take sex or foul language filling their pages to entice readers to flock to the stores to buy them. All it took was excellent writers who knew how to weave unique, fantastical worlds and relatable characters, even if their circumstances were not. Their stories had action and great plot lines that kept readers on edge, wanting to read more and discover what would happen to the characters they had fallen in love with. They created fantastic creatures, worlds, and epic battle scenes that wove into our imagination and brought us to the very doors of their imaginations. These two excellent writers achieved greatness without allowing vulgarity to smear the pages of their text.

In the eighties, many modern fantasy books used sayings like “he swore viciously” or created new, creative swear words, and so forth, but suddenly there was a shift where instead of the reader filling in the blank where the novel just said the character swore viciously themselves, the blank was filled. It started with small words until it grew until almost every page was covered with words that took away from the story.

The words were no longer left up to the readers' imagination, but they were right there on the page, and it was not long after that, when the sex started showing up outside of the so-called “trashy romance novels,” that everyone expected it to be in. Now, any book can be picked up, and it is there in the pages. The reader’s imagination is no longer just being filled with journeys of characters discovering who they are and their battle against evil, but now their imagination is being filled with vulgarity at every turn. With so much vulgarity filling the pages, the reader's imagination is constantly being interrupted and pulled out of the story as it is jarred back into reality by such words and actions on the page.

As the years progressed, there was a shift in the writing style in the fantasy genre. While pieces were still put out that didn’t have sex or foul language, there were pieces like *Game of*

*Thrones* that took things to a whole different level. This book series had everything from incest to gang rape in it and everything in between. It is labeled for ages seventeen and above but does anyone need to be pulled into a world that normalizes such graphic sex scenes? The quote from *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin, “When you play a game of thrones, you win, or you die,” is the quote that first drew so many into the series as it was plastered everywhere with images of dragons. Then there was all the hype that started about the book. It was filled with battles and dragons. Who doesn’t like dragons? However, the pages were not only adventure packed and filled with dragons, as many hope, but laced with so much vulgarity it was hard to get through a chapter without it bombarding the reader in the face with sex and foul language. The hard truth is these books are not the only ones with such vulgarity in them that pull the fantasy nerd in with the hope of an adventure and new world to explore.

C.S. Lewis stated, “The world does not need more Christian literature. What it needs is more Christians writing good literature.” Even when he was writing, he understood the need for Christians to take up the pen and write good literature. He understood that the world needed writers that could write in all genres appropriate material for people to read. C.S. Lewis was a fantastic fantasy writer who could tell a tale that pulled the reader in and touched their hearts, letting it stay with them for the rest of their lives. C.S. Lewis created a world in the series *Chronicles of Narnia* that has been great for young teens and adults and accomplished this feat without foul language or sex in any of his novels.

J.R.R Tolkien said, “Fantasy remains a human right we make in our measure and our derivative mode because we are made: not only made but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.” He believed that people came from a Heavenly Father with enough imagination to create everything people see before them and beyond, so why limit their imagination to science?

Tolkien believed in creating intricate worlds with beings, creatures, histories, languages, etc., that people could get lost in and feel like they were there. He let his imagination run free and wild as he wrote and created such magical places. If Tolkien saw some fantasy pieces today, he would be appalled by what was included in the stories that were supposed to pull readers into their pages and wrap them in a blanket of imagination that made them feel like they were home. He succeeded in doing this with his most renowned work.

Tolkien's most well-known work was written about a world called Middle-Earth that has impressed and touched generations and will continue to do so through the ages because he used the imagination God gave him to follow in his Heavenly Father's footsteps and create a world out of nothing. Middle-Earth, the world J.R.R. Tolkien created, was a world where there was a battle between the light and dark, and a world that rotated around the journey of life that every person goes through as they battle through the fight against the darkness. People relate to the characters strongly because they struggle at some point in the series, showing that no one is above temptation or untouched by the evil of the characters' world. Tolkien's ability to pull the reader into his world makes his series one of the best fantasy series ever created. Yet, there was not any sex or foul language in any of his novels. J.R.R. Tolkien's series stood strong without having either of those two things in it.

C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien are still being read today without all the inappropriate elements that some other fantasy novels have. Why is it necessary to put them in the stories? Are not these authors proof that the books will sell if authors have a good plot line, action, and a powerful message? The evidence is right there for all to see. C.S. Lewis's series *Chronicles of Narnia* and J.R.R. Tolkien's series *Lord of the Rings* have both been in production for over sixty years and will probably be in production for years to come. Yet, so many argue that the reason

they place sex and foul language in their fantasy novels is to make them sell more. “Sex sells” is what those authors say; however, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien have both sold millions and millions of copies of each of their books without sex or foul language in their pieces. They created worlds so fantastic that all the reader needed was the journey and experience of the world the authors created to get lost in the pages.

Fantasy authors, and authors in general, understand the importance of imagination. In *Plotting a Fantasy Novel* by Tasha Dunn, she states, “Since the dawn of time, humans have woven fantasy worlds and all sorts of mythical creatures from the threads of their imaginations,” even little children weave stories of imaginary friends and fantasy worlds through their imagination. With such a wholesome beginning in the minds of every child, how can it shift so quickly into something that is not suited for children to read? Many people think that once they are an adult, they must put their imagination aside and grow up; however, they don’t truly understand what part in their lives imagination plays.

One thing that makes fantasy the best genre to write in is that the writer’s imagination can fly free and create a world that has never been seen before by anyone else. The writer can jump into the shoes of their childhood self and bring to life all those stories that used to rattle around in their younger self’s brain and bring them to life for everyone else to read about. It is one of the greatest joys for an author to know that their readers enjoyed the worlds they created inside their books. Modern fantasy writers give readers a part of themselves by letting them read the things they have created. Why would authors let sex and foul language limit who they could share those worlds with?

The food people put into their bodies can either strengthen their bodies or hurt their bodies. Every day people are bombarded with the importance of what they eat and drink, what



they put into their bodies, and how important it is for them to exercise. However, no one talks about how important it is to watch what fills their minds. If they fill their minds with junk, then the junk is what will come out of them. People imitate so much of what they see and hear and don't even realize they are doing it most of the time. Children constantly emulate their parents, celebrities they admire, or characters from a book they love. If any of these are not good role models for the children to emulate, then what the children will put forth for the world to see is the poor habits and found behaviors they learned from their role models.

Whether good or bad, people will let out what they take into their minds. People allowing their minds access to everything and anything, even if it is inappropriate, leads them to lose the ability to understand what is wrong and empathize with others. As people allow themselves to become more desensitized by what they are allowing to enter their minds, their interactions with other human beings become more explosive, leaving the world in the mess it is in today. So, just like people need to care for their bodies and what they allow their children to take into their bodies, they must care for their minds and protect the minds of their children. They need to take in things that make them better and allow their children to take in things that make them better. Doing this will help every produce a product they can share with the world.

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Zipes, Jack. "Why Fantasy Matters Too Much." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*

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## Annotated Bibliography

“C. S. Lewis Quote.” AZ Quotes, [www.azquotes.com/quote/498791](http://www.azquotes.com/quote/498791). Accessed 2 Oct. 2022.

C.S. Lewis is the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia* amongst other novels. His quote found on the the website [www.azquotes.com](http://www.azquotes.com) is about the fact that more christian literature isn't needed but more christians writing good literature is needed. This quote was important in the essay because it created a base for the reason for his writing and the importance for the type of writing that I am advocating for in this essay.

Coulson, Justin. “The Problem With Exposing Kids to Sexual and Violent Content.” Institute of Family Studies, 15 Jan. 2015, [ifstudies.org/blog/the-problem-with-exposing-kids-to-sexual-and-violent-content](http://ifstudies.org/blog/the-problem-with-exposing-kids-to-sexual-and-violent-content).

Dr. Justin Coulson is the author of *What Your child Needs From You: Creating a Connected Family*. In this article, “The Problem With Exposing Kids to Sexual and Violent Content,” Dr. Justin Coulson discusses the problems with exposing children to content with violence and sexual content in it. Dr. Coulson discusses research and studies that have taken place over the years on the impact sexual and violent content has had on children and adults alike. This article was important to the critical essay because it gave facts about what happens when children and adults are subjected to vulgarity.

Dunn, Tasha, et al. *Plotting a fantasy Novel: Learn Elements of Plot and Structure, Outlining Scenes, Outlining Chapters, and Create a Compelling Book: fantasy Novel Writing Made Easy, Book 1*. Angel Prime Publishing, 2022.

*Plotting a Fantasy Novel* discusses the elements of a fantasy novel, point of view, and many other things that have to do with writing in the fantasy genre. This book was important to define what fantasy was and to gain a true understanding of the genre.

Foul Language, N. Oxford Languages and Google - English | Oxford Languages. 6 Dec. 2022, [languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en](https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en).

This website is an online dictionary that has not only words but phrases as well. This website was used to define foul language, which was crucial to understanding the phrase and how it would be used in the critical essay.

Godawa, Brian. *The Imagination of God*. Warrior Poet Publishing, 2022.

Brian Godawa is an artist and screenwriter. His book discusses the importance God places on imagination in the scriptures. He discusses imagination in many different aspects and how important it is to understand imagination as much as it is to understand the rational side of things. This book helped to shape a lot of the discussion in the essay when it came to imagination. It helped to discuss what imagination was and why it was important.

Guite, Malcolm. *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God*. Square Halo Books, 2021.

Malcolm Guite is a writer who uses this book to discuss the importance of imagination and its impact on our reality. He goes into detail about how imagination helps shape how we perceive our reality. This book was a key piece in the essay and helped to explain many points and helped to point out how important it is to keep our imagination pure and protected.

“Imagination.” *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, 5 Dec. 2022, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imagination](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imagination).

This website is the Merriam-webster dictionary online that defines words. It was used to help give the denotation meaning of the word imagination, while other sources were used to give more of the connotation meaning behind the word imagination.

J. R. R. Tolkien Quotes. [www.notable-quotes.com/t/tolkien\\_j\\_r\\_r.html](http://www.notable-quotes.com/t/tolkien_j_r_r.html). Accessed 2 Oct. 2022.

This website has quotes from many authors, including J.R.R. Tolkien. Since J.R.R. Tolkien is an author that is discussed a lot in the essay, it was very important to have his own words woven into the essay.

Jacobs, J. S., and M. O. Tunnell. *Children's Literature, Briefly*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, us, Pearson Education, 2008.

This book is a brief introduction to children's literature. It introduces many things, including definitions. This book helped define what modern fantasy is and what makes up the genre. Knowing the definition of modern fantasy was important to understand the essay.

Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Antiquarius, 2021.

C. S. Lewis is an author who has created many different pieces. His most well-known piece is *The Chronicles of Narnia*. *The Chronicles of Narnia* is a story about siblings who are sent to the country for their protection during the war. They end up in a magical world with many different types of creatures and are faced with many different trials they must overcome. Throughout the series some of the main characters change but it all revolves around the underlining message of right and wrong and believing in the unseen. This series was important to the essay because it is a good example of a type of fantasy novel that has captured the world without the use of vulgarity.

MACDONALD, GEORGE. *Phantastes*. MINT EDITIONS, 2021.

George Macdonald has been labeled as the first author of the modern fantasy novel. *His piece Phantastes* is about a twenty-one year old who ends up in a fairy land where he goes on a journey. He is faced with many creatures and learns a lot of lessons about growing up. He learns about self-control, how to be humble, and how to put others before himself. This book was important to show the beginnings of the modern fantasy genre.

Mead, Richelle. *Vampire Academy*. Penguin Group (Australia), 2014.

Richelle Mead is an author who writes fantasy including paranormal fantasy. *Vampire Academy* is a six book series that revolves around two girls, one is a vampire and one her guardian, and the different things they are facing. It is meant to be a book for teenagers. This series is mentioned in the essay to show an example of the types of content that is in some novels.

R., Martin George R. *A Song of Fire and Ice*. Bantam Books, 2013.

George R. R. Martin is an author who wrote about a fictional world that occurs mostly on one continent. It has a lot of graphic material, which is why it is used as an example in the critical essay.

R., Tolkien J R, et al. *The Lord of the Rings*. HarperCollinsPublishers, 2014.

J. R. R. Tolkien is an author who created the world of Middle Earth. *The Lord of the Rings* is the First installment of his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. J. R. R. Tolkien is used a lot in the essay as the type of writer that should be mimicked as a fantasy writer.

R., Tolkien J R. *Return of the King*. HARPERCOLLINS PUBLISHERS, 2022.

J. R. R. Tolkien is an author who created the world of Middle Earth. *Return of the King* is the third installment of his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. J. R. R. Tolkien is used a lot in the essay as the type of writer that should be mimicked as a fantasy writer.

R., TOLKIEN J R. *Two Towers*. HARPERCOLLINS PUBLISHERS, 2022.

J. R. R. Tolkien is an author who created the world of Middle Earth. *Two Towers* is the second installment of his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. J. R. R. Tolkien is used a lot in the essay as the type of writer that should be mimicked as a fantasy writer.

Sifferlin, Alexandra. "Profanity in Teen Novels: Character Who Curse Are Often the Most Desirable." *Healthland.time.com*, 18 May 2012, [healthland.time.com/2012/05/18/profanity-in-teen-novels-characters-with-foul-language-re-often-the-most-desirable](http://healthland.time.com/2012/05/18/profanity-in-teen-novels-characters-with-foul-language-re-often-the-most-desirable).

Alexandra Sifferlin is a health and science journalist. Sifferlin's article discusses a study about different novels and how the characters that curse are considered the most desirable because of their looks and position. It goes on to talk about how difficult it is to monitor books which is why books for young teenagers have a lot of language that can be found in young teenagers' books. This article was important to the essay to show that the language is found in many young teenage novels and that it isn't monitored at all, meaning that anything could show up in a novel.

Zipes, Jack. "Why Fantasy Matters Too Much." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.4 (2006): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1392>>

Jack Zipes discusses in his article how the things that we take in have an impact on our fantasies. He goes on to discuss how we then try to push our fantasies off onto



reality. This article was important to the essay to show how damaging having your imagination corrupted by what you are taking in can be.

## Thief's Fire Segment:

## Chapter One

Falon stood in the middle of the room, her face cast in shadow by the hood that covered her head. She stood quietly as the men looked down from the platform where they sat and held counsel. Three men from each group that lived in Thief's city: three Fae, three Witches, and three Humans. It always unnerved her as they all stared at her with piercing eyes. The room, like always, was empty except for the nine men that held council here. They were the ones who kept control of their home. They made the decisions. Falon focused her attention back on the man speaking to learn what was so important that they insisted that she leave right away.

“Our spy tells us that the documents are located in a Witch's house in Bleveria near the Sparky Tavern. The documents, if decoded, will lead them right to our home,” one of the Witch Councilman said. He looked around the room at the other Council members as if confirming their approval. “This Council wants you and your partner to retrieve the papers at all costs. We can't have that information fall into Damian's hands. He grows more powerful every day. It will only be a matter of time before our secret is discovered, but we will try to conceal it a little longer.” The Council looked down at Falon, and every member of the council nodded their agreement at the speaker's words. “You and your partner know that town better than our other spies. Go and be careful.”

Falon nodded, then left the cold room.

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Falon sat with her back to the dark wood wall and scanned the tavern. It was one of the few places she could stand to be for more than a few minutes at a time because, even though the town was filled with the enemy, paying the right people money meant her presence there went

unnoticed by the Witch Guard. And she needed to go unnoticed. Falon had a price on her head that would cause any bounty hunter's mouth to salivate at the prospect of bringing her in for the reward. After spending time in prison once before, Falon would fight to the death before going back. She would never again allow herself to be tortured or spend time in that kind of hell.

Falon sighed at the dark thoughts and focused on the tavern as she pulled herself away from the pain of her past. If she focused on the here and now, she could stop the spiral that happened if she got lost in her thoughts for too long. Her mind was never a nice place to get lost in the depths. She looked around the tavern, her mouth in its standard thin line as she refused to show emotion. Falon believed that showing emotion to those other than those you trusted was a dangerous notion.

Falon loved the tavern's dark atmosphere, it allowed a being to hide, and there were plenty of beings here trying to hide, but no one paid her any mind. She looked down at the worn tabletop noticing the grooves in the wood that reminded her of a knife mark. Falon tried to picture what could have caused the scar on the table. Was there a fight that happened that ended with a knife landing on the table? She shook her head at her silly thoughts. For what seemed like the hundredth time in mere minutes, she tied her hair back at the nape of her neck to keep it out of her face and hide the birthmark she liked to keep hidden on her neck. The black flame mark swirled into itself and rested at the base of her skull. She sighed in frustration as a rebellious strand immediately worked its way out of the tie. Her auburn hair that had streaks of copper and fire red in it fell past her shoulders, but it was so thick and unruly it didn't like to stay in a tie.

"Come on, Ariana," Falon said under her breath. She shifted in her chair, trying to get comfortable. Falon was tired of waiting for her friend to show up. They had a job to do. She wanted to get it over with and get out of this town. She hated being out in public like this,

especially in a Witch town where the enemy was in abundance. She scanned the room again, and a small smile played at the corner of her lips when a blond-haired woman with bright silver eyes came toward her. Only when her best friend Ariana was around did she sometimes let emotion flicker on her face when they were in public.

“It's about time,” Falon said, using her foot to shove a chair toward her friend.

“Sorry, I'm running a tad late,” Ariana replied. A frown appeared on her face as she took in Falon's appearance. Falon watched as Ariana's eyes went from Falon's face to her clothing before returning to her face again.

“You haven't been sleeping again,” Ariana stated as a fact as she pursed her lips.

“No,” Falon said, rubbing her tired eyes that had dark circles under them. “Listen, how about we get some food, do this job, then go home for a while.” She tried to straighten her clothes to look more like herself and less of a mess. She usually was put together, her clothing straight and orderly and her posture stiff, but at this moment, she was just too tired to care. She had been traveling for a few days, and her normal pristine black leather pants, tunic, corset, and cloak were covered in a layer of dust from walking the different terrain for days. She had spent a lot of time attempting to sleep on the forest floor and walking on dirt roads lately. The dark circles under her eyes were from the fact that she hadn't slept in days. She always struggled to sleep, but when she traveled alone, she didn't sleep. The need to stay alert and watch her back was constantly there. Falon had to be on her toes and ensure no one could sneak up on her. She rubbed her eyes to try and wake herself up a little more.

Ariana offered her a bright smile. It always impressed Falon that even when they were about to go on a mission in a town that neither of them wanted to be in, Ariana could smile.

“Food sounds nice. I’m starving.” Ariana waved at the owner of the Sparky Tavern. He smiled and hurried over. “Hello, James.”

“Red,” he said, nodding toward Falon. “Goldy, I haven’t seen you here in a while.” He kept his voice quiet so no one near could hear the silly nicknames he had given Falon and Ariana. James was a large man with blonde hair and blue eyes. His arms were scarred from what looked like whip marks. It angered Falon every time she saw them. The marks were just another example of how humans were treated. They were treated more like chattel than beings. So many Witches and Fae saw Humans as inferior creatures who should be controlled with pain and force if necessary. Falon was one that many Witches and Fae had tried to reign in and control. No one had been successful yet, and no one ever would be. Falon would die free.

Arianna gave James a charming smile and stood to hug him while Falon acknowledged him with a slight nod, her eyes staying cold and her mouth in a hard line. Never once did she smile at anyone other than Ariana or those from home. She ensured anyone outside her home knew very little about what was happening inside her head.

“So, the usual?” James asked with a nod and a chuckle as Ariana sat back down with her usual bouncy energy.

They had been coming to this tavern for the past three years. Anytime they needed to get the information, they would stop here. It was a place they could pay off the right people to forget they ever saw them, and the ones they didn’t have to pay didn’t care to remember two women. Enough beings came in and out of this town and tavern to make them go unnoticed. It also made it one of the best places to gather information and meet with beings for information. The only person who noticed or remembered them was James, the owner. After a year, James had dubbed them Red and Goldy because of their hair color since they refused to tell him their names. It was

the only time Falon had been unable to hide her feelings around him. It had utterly surprised and shocked her that he had given her a nickname. Her face gave her away by her mouth falling open a little and her eyes widening. It only took a moment for her to get it under control and for her hard exterior to return, but it had happened.

“That would do nicely,” Ariana replied with her usual charm.

“Thank you, James,” Falon said with her cold tone. She knew he wouldn’t take it personally. He had known them long enough that she spoke to everyone like that. He knew not to take offense to it. James gave both women a smirk and a wink before grabbing their food.

Ariana turned back to Falon. “How was the Council meeting?”

“It went like normal. Very creepily.” Falon smirked for a second before her mouth returned to its hard line. “We must steal the documents back at all costs before they can break our code.”

“Yes, I know.” Ariana gave Falon a cocky smile. “And it is always creepy. They need to work on that.”

“If you knew, why did you ask?” Falon knew that smile. Ariana was a Seer who had moments when she saw things very clearly, and other times things were jumbled. It was those times that led Falon into trouble.

“Conversation.” Ariana shrugged and giggled a little.

Falon looked over Ariana’s shoulder and stiffened as she saw two Fae enter the tavern. Without hesitation, she pulled the hood of her cloak up to cast her face in shadow. She looked across the table and saw the worry in her friend’s eyes.

“What is the trouble, my friend?” Ariana asked as she pulled her own hood up without waiting for the answer.

“Fae Bounty Hunters,” Falon said through a clenched jaw as she started trying to look around the room for a way to escape. The backdoor was through the kitchen, which would take them in clear view of the Fae Bounty Hunters. The last thing they needed was to be seen by Fae Bounty Hunters. What were they doing in a Witch town anyway? Their type typically stayed in Fae towns. Falon had never seen one in a Witch town before. She had run across many hunters before, but they all had been in either Fae towns or the wild. None of them had been in Witch towns.

“Are you sure?”

“Their cloaks give them away.” Falon had noticed the intricate designs in the material instantly. She had been around enough of them and chased by enough to know what those designs meant.

“We need to leave now.” They could not be seen and take a chance that they were chased when they were this close to those documents.

Falon touched Ariana’s hand to impress on her how important it was for them to leave. At her touch, Ariana’s eyes unfocused for a moment. Falon knew that look, and it was that look that caused a sinking feeling to fill her. That look had led her into more trouble than anything else.

“We can’t,” Ariana said desperately.

“Don’t do this, Ariana. Don’t,” Falon said, pointing her finger in Ariana’s face. “We don’t have time for one of your visions. Not now.” She narrowed her brown eyes at her friend, hoping to intimidate her, but she should have known that it wouldn’t work. Falon sighed when she saw the stubborn set of her friend’s jaw and the seriousness in her silver eyes. There would be no talking Ariana out of whatever had entered her head.

“We must stay,” Ariana said as she grasped Falon’s wrist. Falon could hear the desperation in her friend’s voice, and it stabbed at her heart. Very few people could reach her heart; Ariana was one of the few. “We must save them!”

Falon’s mouth fell open. She had not been expecting that. It took her a few moments to respond because she was shocked. Had her friend lost her mind? Save Fae Bounty Hunters!

“No! Absolutely not. I won’t risk my neck and our job for some Fae Bounty Hunters,” Falon growled as she crossed her arms in front of her chest and stared Ariana down.

“They are important to our future. To the future of this war,” Ariana pleaded, giving Falon the most pitiful eyes and making her naturally pouty lips even more so. “Trust me.”

Falon closed her eyes and groaned. “Of all the witches for me to make friends with, it had to be you. A bloody Seer.” She opened her eyes and looked over Ariana’s shoulder at the two large Bounty Hunters. “How much time do we have?”

“Not much. If we don’t act quickly, they’ll die.” Ariana looked over her shoulder to take a look at the Fae. “They’re important. Please, Falon, trust me!”

Falon could hear the panic in her friend’s voice, and she hated it. “I do trust you,” she said quietly, thoughtfully. “What do I need to do?” Falon said soft, soothing tone as she gave in to her friend’s wishes. Falon would give her friend anything to keep the panic away. If they were essential to the war against Damian, Falon would save them.

Ariana jerked her head back around, giving her a bright smile. “Do you see the one with black hair? His Fae mark is red.” Every Fae was born with a mark that was unique to them. The only thing similar between the Fae’s marks was where it was located. It was always located on the left side of the neck. It went from behind the left ear to where the neck met the shoulder.



Each mark was made of intricate designs, all of which had color. Some of them had one color, and others had more than one.

Falon nodded, cutting her eyes back to the two Bounty Hunters. She found the one with the red Fae mark. She was intrigued by the mark. It was unlike any she had ever seen before. It was red, but as he moved, it seemed to shift into different shades of red. Almost like fire. Interesting. Nearly as impressive as the large Fae it was on.

“Knock him to the ground when I tell you to. If you don’t, then that Witch in the corner,” Ariana moved her eyes so Falon could follow them to the right corner. “He will kill him before the Fae can put a shield up.”

Falon had noticed the Witches in the corner earlier when she had first arrived at the tavern. They hid in the corner in a group making no eye contact with anyone reminding Falon of rats. Not even Falon hides in corners. She might move, so her back was to the back wall, but she didn’t hide in corners. The only reason she even put her hood up was that the Bounty Hunters had shown up. She had learned it was better to hide in plain sight than in the shadows. Everyone seemed to notice the ones who tried to hide in the shadows.

“Let me make sure I understand you correctly. You want us to interfere in a Witch and Fae dispute? And not any Witch and Fae dispute. One that involves two Fae Bounty Hunters. A dispute that will cause us nothing but trouble. Is that correct?” Falon’s eyes held an abrasive and somewhat confused glare toward her friend. If her face weren’t a dead giveaway of her immense aggravation, the tone of her voice would leave no room for questioning her feelings toward this entire situation.

Ariana shrugged. “Sounds like a normal Tuesday for us.”

“It’s Friday, Ariana,” Falon said flatly as she pinched her nose with her forefinger and thumb. “You will get me killed by the night's end.”

“Don’t be dramatic. It isn’t your time.” Ariana rolled her beautiful silver eyes.

“Why don’t I find that comforting?” Falon asked as she cut her brown eyes at her friend. “Oh, I remember. Because your visions have a habit of not being completely clear.” She turned back to the Fae as she muttered under her breath. “Bloody Seer. So-called best friend.” She tilted her head as she looked at her Fae more closely. He was one of the meanest-looking men she had ever seen. His mouth was in a hard line, and his eyes were cold as steel. His olive skin and black hair made him seem even more foreboding. “Why do I get the mean-looking one?”

Ariana raised a blond eyebrow at me. “You’re mean as well. I’m sure you can handle him.”

“This evening is doomed to end badly.”

“Stop being so negative,” Ariana giggled. “Now, get ready. I promise these two are important. Very important.”

“Very well. I trust you, but I will choose us if it comes to them or us.” Falon secured her cloak to ensure it would not go anywhere when she had to tackle the large, handsome Fae. Wait, handsome. When did she start thinking he was handsome?

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Aidan entered the tavern with the most absurd name he had ever heard before, his eyes scanning the crowd. The Sparky Tavern. What did that even mean? He shook his head to get it focused back on the mission. He and his best friend Cale had been hunting a Witch by the name of Luther for two weeks. They had finally cornered him here in this town, and the trail ended at this tavern. Aidan was going to find him, capture him, and get out of this tavern and town. He

hated being in a place that made him feel so tense. Not that he wasn't always tense these days. Ever since he and Cale had started fighting against Damian instead of for him, they had been on edge, looking over their shoulders constantly.

"This is a bad idea, Aidan," Cale spoke quietly next to his friend.

Cale had wanted to stay outside and wait for Luther to come to them, but Aidan had grown impatient. Aidan wanted this over and done. He looked over at his friend and knew what was going through his mind. Cale thought that Aidan would be the death of him one day. But even with those thoughts, he still followed Aidan and watched his back.

"We are just going to get him and get out," Aidan said matter of factly. "It shouldn't take long." He had always been cocky but lately, going on very little sleep; it seemed he had gotten even worse.

"Yes, and the fact that we are in a Witch town, in a Witch tavern, won't be a problem," Cale said in a sharp, sarcastic manner, "This is a suicide mission, my friend," Cale said, his voice sounding agitated.

"That is a mere technicality, not a problem, and this is not a suicide mission." Aidan narrowed his eyes as he looked at Cale. Aidan stood two inches taller than Cale at 6'5 and was slightly broader in the shoulders. And that wasn't the only difference between the two. They had been best friends for a long time, and honestly, Cale was the only one who could put up with Aidan for any time. Aidan was a cold being with black hair, green eyes, and olive-skinned. He didn't allow anyone close to him. The only friend he ever had was Cale, and that was because they had been friends since they were children. Cale had brown hair and brown eyes and was a little tan but not a lot. Aidan wanted to take down as many of the enemy as possible before he died. Cale had other plans. Aidan knew that his friend stayed with him to keep him alive. Cale

was a fair, kind Fae who deserved a better friend than Aidan. Even knowing all this, Aidan couldn't help the following words that came out of his mouth.

“Have you lost your nerve?” Aidan arched an eyebrow at him. “Maybe you should wait outside where it's safe.” He smirked when he heard Cale growl and saw him clench his jaw.

“Don't try my patience. Friend or not, I will still cause you pain.” Cale's clenched jaw had started to twitch.

Aidan snorted. “You and what army?”

“I'm worried about you, Aidan. You look awful. When was the last time you had a good night's sleep? You must be all here to do what you want tonight.”

Aidan hated hearing the worry in his friend's voice and the censor there. He shrugged. “I'm fine. I'll sleep after this job.”

“Dream again?”

He should have known Cale wouldn't let it go. “It has gotten worse lately. Stronger for some reason.” He had had the same dream for as long as Aidan could remember. A faceless woman was there singing, waiting for him. And not just any woman, his mate. The one woman who would help fill this hole in his soul. The dream always started the same. Her voice fills him with a song, a lullaby he remembered from childhood. The dream would then shift to her standing in front of me and fire flowing around her. He never saw her face, never could get close enough even to catch a glimpse, but he knew who it was.

“Maybe the dream getting stronger is Fate letting you know that she is near. That it is close to the time for you to meet her. We are old. Most Fae have met their mates by our age.”

Aidan could hear the teasing in his friend's voice, but it didn't lift his spirits or pull him out of the sadness that the dream always brought. “No, my mate died years ago. This is just

Fate's way of torturing me. Showing me something I will never have. Maybe it is punishment for my past sins." He scanned the room once more. He needed to focus on anything other than his thoughts. On anything other than the dream, his mate, whom he would never have, or this pointless conversation. He needed to focus on the mission. As his eyes scanned the beings, his eyes landed on two hooded figures. He was suddenly intrigued. Why would two beings hide in a tavern such as this? He always did like trying to figure out beings' secrets. Maybe after taking care of things with the Witch, he could figure out why those two were hiding. He moved his eyes off them and went back to scanning the tavern.

The Witch he was after would be hiding in a corner, in the dark, like a rat, and as his eyes looked into the last corner, they landed on him, Luther. He was responsible for the death of over twenty innocents. Aidan and Cale were going to make sure he paid for his crimes. As Aidan took a step toward the corner, Luther's eyes landed on Aidan's. Aidan stopped moving as Luther smiled smugly and winked. It was at that moment that Aidan realized Cale had been right. This was a suicide mission. Aidan must be more tired than he thought because it had never occurred to him that Luther might have others with him.

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Falon watched the Fae Ariana had assigned her closely and noticed him stiffening when his eyes lingered on her and Ariana. Something about him was different from any other being she had ever seen. When his eyes landed on her, she instantly felt drawn to him, a pull like nothing she had ever felt before. Without him even being able to look into her eyes, she felt like he could see into her soul. It unnerved her. It was the most uncomfortable she had felt in years. It made her wonder what part these two Fae would play in her and Ariana's lives. She shook her head to get it focused back on the task at hand. Now wasn't the time to wonder about things to come.

Now was the time to focus on the present and saving the Fae's life. When his eyes moved off her, she stood and slowly walked toward him, trying not to draw unwanted attention to herself. If she could skirt around the room, she would have a clear shot at him when things went wrong. And things were about to go very bad. She didn't have to be a Seer like Ariana to feel the energy building in the air. The hairs on her arms were starting to stand on end as powers were beginning to be pulled. She glanced toward the corner and saw the smug smile on the Witch's face. It was at that moment she knew she was out of time. She acted quickly. She placed her booted foot on the chair's seat and stepped onto it before stepping onto a table. It took only a few graceful moves to run across the table and jump to the next one avoiding the beings that were in the way of her and the Fae cutting off precious seconds that it would have taken her if she had tried to push through the crowd. When she came to the end of the last table, she dove off the table, knocking into the Fae and pushing him out of the way just as a blast of power came at him. Falon felt the rush of heat go over the top of her back, even through her thick winter cloak. She had knocked the Fae down with no time to spare.

As Aidan's back hit the tavern floor, he was pulled out of his shock that he was just tackled, and he was able to react finally. He pushed away from the stranger with a slash of his dagger and rolled to a crouching position, trying to see who this new threat was. When his eyes landed on the cloaked figure from earlier, he got ready to attack again. The only thing that stopped him from standing and going after the being that was starting to make its way to its feet was the sound of sizzling coming from behind him. Aidan slowly turned his head to see a large hole with charred edges where he once stood. His eyes widened as he realized that he would have been killed if he hadn't been knocked down. What the hell had he done with his senses?

Guilt filled him as he looked down at his dagger and saw blood drip off its tip. He had hurt the being that had saved him. He made it to his feet and surveyed the scene.

Four other Witches had joined Luther; three headed toward the hooded being's way. Aidan watched as the being's head turned toward where Cale and the other hooded figure from earlier were. Aidan looked away from Cale, knowing that Cale would handle the two Witches going after him. Aidan focused on the three going after his savior. The being was standing on his feet, waiting. He was a brave thing. Small but brave. At least he wasn't the only one who needed saving. Aidan watched as all three of them pulled power, and pulling power of his own; it was his turn to knock his savior to the ground.

"Are you insane?" Aidan snapped as power hit the shield he placed around him and the being under him.

"Get off me," Falon growled, not liking that she was pinned by the idiot Bounty Hunter. If he had left things alone, she would have been able to use one of her devices and deal with the problem. It didn't help that the being who had pinned her was sending mixed feelings through her. She hissed when his arm braced next to her and hit the wound he had inflicted earlier with his dagger. She had saved his life, and he had rewarded her by attacking her—stupid idiot.

Aidan's eyes widened, and he jerked his head back at the figure under him. It couldn't be. He made himself look into the face of the being under him. A woman. It was a woman. His green eyes took in her chocolate brown eyes that had the nerve to look annoyed with him.

"You're a woman," he said in shock.

"What was your first clue?" she asked sarcastically. "Get. Off."

Aidan growled when he looked at her neck and saw no Fae mark. "You're a human!" he hadn't meant to yell at the shock the realization caused, but it couldn't be contained.

Falon's eyes narrowed. "Three Witches are attacking us, and two are attacking my friend. Get off of me so that I can handle it." How dare he get that tone of voice with her. She had saved his life, and he had the nerve to say woman and human in a way that made her sound like something disgusting, something less than him. She pushed at him, and with him still in shock; she was able to get out from under him. When she went to get up, he grabbed hold of her again.

"I said to stay down." Aidan hissed at the woman. "Are you hard of hearing, or do you lack intelligence?"

Falon used her free hand and grabbed the front of his cloak, pulling him close to her. "I suggest you beware. I might have saved your life, but I can rectify that now." She released him and pulled a device out of her bag draped over her chest under her cloak. She slid it toward the three witches, almost on top of them. All three looked down at it in confusion and, too late, realized they should have moved away. Gas was released, causing them to collapse to the ground.

Falon looked over at Ariana to see if she had handled the two Witches and wasn't surprised to find them knocked out. She was surprised about how the Fae was staring at her friend. She didn't like it. He was staring at her in awe.

"I can't believe a woman saved me. A human woman at that." Aidan muttered as he looked down at the hooded woman wanting more than anything to reach down and yank the hood back to see her hair color. Why the hell was he interested, he did not know.

Falon jerked her head around and looked at the Fae she had rescued. She hadn't realized how large he was until she was right next to him and looking up into his deep green eyes. Her eyes narrowed, and her back stiffened as she moved closer. Her jaw was clenched tight, not only



in annoyance toward this tree in front of her but also because of the pain filling her from the wound. “What’s wrong with being a woman and human?”

“You could have been killed. You and your friend should have better sense than to get in the middle of a Witch and Fae battle.” Aidan moved so he was standing toe to toe with the woman.

Falon scoffed. “If we hadn’t interfered, you two idiots would have been killed. What kind of bounty hunters don’t know they’re walking into a trap?” she said with some bite to her tone. “And just because I’m human doesn’t mean I can’t take care of myself.” She jerked her eyes to Ariana. “We need to go. Now.” Falon’s tone was cold and harsh, but Ariana shook her head.

“Can’t we-“

“Absolutely not,” Falon snapped.

“You can’t leave! Aidan, they can’t leave!” The Fae Bounty Hunter that Ariana had saved said.

Aidan looked at his friend, shocked. “Let them go, Cale. We have to take Luther and-“

“No, you don’t understand-“

“Cale, get a hold of yourself. We have a job to do.” Aidan grabbed his friend by his shoulders and shook him a little.

“She’s my mate,” Cale whispered harshly. “I sensed it when I looked into her eyes. I’m not leaving this city without her. I’ve waited too long for her..”

Aidan cursed his luck as he thought about being stuck with two human women. He would have to spend more time trying to protect them than doing his job, hunting down the enemy.

“Where are they?” Cale asked, panicking.

Aidan jerked his attention back to the present and out of his thoughts. He looked around the tavern. He sighed heavily, knowing he would now have to look for the women. But maybe Cale would let this go.

“What are the odds that you’ll let us leave this town without finding your mate?” Aidan flinched when Cale cut his eyes at him. If looks could cause pain, Aidan would be on the floor writhing in agony.

“Zero. Absolutely zero, Aidan.”

Aidan saw the stubborn set of his friend’s jaw and knew there would be no talking to him about this. “Very well. Let’s deal with Luther, then go find your woman.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I might kill her companion by the end of this.” Aidan found little joy in being stuck with either of them. He didn’t know if his ego could take the idea of being around the human woman who had saved him.

Cale looked at Aidan with such a severe look that most would have been frightened, and the ones who weren’t scared would not have laughed, but Aidan was not kind. Cale rolled his eyes and huffed.

While Aidan tied Luther’s wrists, Cale handed the tavern owner some money for the damages. He tried to refuse the money, but Cale was persistent. Aidan shook his head at the downcast look on the owner’s face.

“Was it just me, or did that human look worried?”

Aidan shrugged. “Not our problem. I’m sure he is just concerned about all the damages.”

“You’re not as cold as you try to act.”

Aidan turned his eyes to the heavens and shook his head before focusing back on his friend. “Let’s deal with Luther and go find your mate. We can’t save everyone.”

“No, we can’t. But we can save someone if it is our fault if they need saving.”

Guilt filled Aidan. He hated the feeling. He didn’t like being in the wrong. But Cale was right. If the owner of this tavern got in trouble with the Witch’s Guard, it would be Aidan and Cale’s fault. If the owner paid for it, it would be because of Aidan. And the odds that the Witch’s Guard would cause trouble for the tavern's owner were great. They should have waited until Luther left the tavern to take him, but Aidan had grown impatient and decided it would be better to attack in the tavern.

“Fine, we will help if the Witch’s Guard causes a problem for the owner. It will be your fault if we end up with three Humans trailing after us.”

“Three Humans?”

“Yes, the tavern owner, your mate, and the annoying one.”

“My mate is not a Human.” Cale smiled smugly. “She’s a Witch.”

“Your mate is a Witch? That’s even odder than it being a human. And why is a Human and Witch traveling together?” Aidan hated unanswered questions. As soon as they found the women, he would find all the answers to the questions bouncing around in his mind. The first one would be why they had saved them.

## Chapter Two

Falon swore if Ariana asked her one more time to go looking for her mate, she would wring her neck. She knelt and uncovered the bow and arrows she had hidden before going to the tavern.

“Falon, are you listening to me?”

“I’m listening. It’s not hard with how shrill your voice has become.” She stood and secured the quiver to her back before picking up her bow and slinging it over her shoulder.

“I have already promised you we would find your mate after the mission several times. I will not do so again.”

Ariana’s mouth turned down into a pout. She was the type of being that was feminine in everything she did. The way she walked, spoke, and now when pouting.

“That look doesn’t work on me. I’m not one of your followers.” She kept her smile at bay as Ariana huffed at her. “Come on. I want to finish this mission and get back home.”

“After-”

“I will punch you in your face.”

Ariana chuckled. “You sure are cranky.”

“Cranky?” Falon asked in a growl. “Cranky? Of course, I’m cranky. Your visions have again gotten me in trouble!”

“How have they gotten you into trouble? I thought everything went quite well.” Ariana was giving Falon that look that said she was proud of herself. And she should be. Her visions had been correct. The timing had been perfect. What hadn’t been perfect was the Fae that Falon had saved had been less than gracious. He had attacked her. Who attacks the one who saves them?

Pushing her hood back in frustration, Falon ran her hand through her long auburn hair, forgetting it was tied at the nape of her neck. As it came loose, it fell down her back. It was as disheveled as the rest of her. Falon winced with the movement.

“What was that? Why’d you make that face?” Ariana asked as she looked Falon up and down.

Falon could hear the worry in Ariana’s voice. “It’s nothing. Come on.”

They walked silently, staying in the shadows as they walked through town. When they came to the head Witch Guard’s house, Falon watched as Ariana did an incantation to ensure no one was inside the building. Ariana closed her eyes, and a light green light flowed off her hands as she mumbled some words under her breath.

“It’s clear.” Ariana gave Falon a piercing look. “Are you sure you’re up to this? You look pale.”

“I’m fine.” Falon moved to the back door and knelt to look at the lock. She pulled her lock picks out of her bag and worked the lock.

“I could just use my magic to open it,” Ariana stated.

“Most of the time, these doors have alarms on them if spells are used to unlock them, but they never have alarms for someone to pick the lock.” Falon beamed when she heard the click. She stood and turned the knob, opening the door. “Stand watch. I’ll be right back.” She moved through the house swiftly, trying to find the room that was the study. She made her way up the large wooden staircase, opened yet another door, and was happy when she was met with a desk and books.

She scanned the room for any threats before looking for the documents. Falon was a good spy, but she was an even better thief. She knew how people thought and how they hid things. She

pushed aside some books that were just a tad pushed forward from the other books on the shelf and beamed when she found a safe behind them.

“Found it,” Falon whispered to herself. Everyone was so predictable. She used her Witch’s Stone to quickly open the hiding place and drop the spells that had been put in place. Very few Witches had a Witch’s Stone. A necklace with a stone in the middle with the powers of several generations of Witches poured into it. Hers was the only one she had ever seen. The others were depleted during the Elemental wars over a thousand years ago in the fight against the Elementals that had tried to rule over all the beings instead of living in peace with everyone. Now it was Damian, the meanest and vilest Fae in existence, doing that.

Falon reached into the safe and grabbed the documents that would lead to her home if the Witch Guard could decode them. She could take the papers with her, or she could destroy them right here, and they wouldn’t fall into the wrong hands again. Falon smirked and used her powers, enough to make a small flame. Any more extensive than this, bad things would happen, even if this were a gamble. She set the papers on fire, put them on the desk, and ensured they were destroyed before hurrying down the stairs and out the back door.

“Did you put the documents in your bag?” Ariana asked when she noticed Falon’s hands empty.

“No, I destroyed them. I don’t want to risk them falling into the wrong hands again, and the way my luck has been lately, that might happen. We should get away from here quickly. We don’t know when the head guard will come back home. Plus, if we’re going to find your mate, we need to hurry. I want to get out of this town before dawn.”

Ariana nodded, knowing Falon was right. Destroying the documents was the best thing they could do. There should never have been a map of their home made in the first place. As they

made their way through the shadows, they caught a glimpse of something that sidetracked them from their mission to find Ariana's mate. "Falon, why do they have James?"

Falon watched as two of the Witch's Guard dragged James toward the prison. "They must be questioning him about the fight at his tavern."

"They'll kill him and his family when they're done."

"I know." Falon looked at Ariana. "We will have to look for your mate later. Get his family and take them to Thief's Cave. If I don't meet you there by dawn, you take his family and go home."

Ariana scoffed. "If you don't meet me there by dawn, I'm coming back for you." She gave Falon a little smile.

Falon shook her head and chuckled a little before leaving her friend to follow after the two Witch's Guard that had taken James. She stayed far enough behind so that the Guards wouldn't see her. Falon remained in the shadows of a nearby building as James was dragged through the prison's large wood and iron front doors. She chewed on her lip as she tried to figure out the best way to get into the fortified building. She sighed heavily and waited for the guards on duty to make their rounds before hurrying closer to the prison. She quietly made her way to the nearest window. Falon touched her witch's stone and said a spell under her breath. A red haze filled the window showing that there were spells put on it to sound if anyone tried to open it or break into it with magic. She smirked as she used her dagger to wiggle and unlatch the window. Witches were always so overconfident with their spells that they never thought about the simple things. Once the window was open, Falon pulled herself through the window and closed it quietly.

Falon ensured her hood was secured and kept her dagger in hand as she slowly opened the door to look into the hall. No one was there. She stealthily made her way down the hall, looking for any signs of guards patrolling the corridors. Chills ran down her spine as she heard a scream of agony. Someone was being tortured. Falon closed her eyes to give herself a moment to get control of her emotions and memories. Being in this place and hearing those tortured screams was bringing back the memories she tried to keep buried. She didn't have time to have a breakdown. She needed to focus and help James before it was too late. Falon was pretty positive the screams had come from him. James had protected her and Ariana for the past three years by keeping them a secret. Now it was time for her to return the favor. She continued to move down the cold hallways. Falon pressed herself against the wall when she heard footsteps.

"I know I heard something," a deep gravelly voice said in aggravation as it moved closer to Falon.

She had the decision to make. Hide or take out whoever was coming her way. If she didn't handle them, they could become a problem later, but if she took care of them now, it could alert the others to her presence. Falon pulled out two daggers and said a spell that made the daggers glow for an instant. They would fly with more swiftness and force, hopefully making these kills silent.

"We've done spells to reveal anything hidden, and nothing showed up. You're probably just tired. We've been on duty for over twelve hours." This voice was softer than the other and sounded like it belonged to a woman. "Come on. Our replacements are here to take over, and I want to get home to see my husband and kids."

"I don't know why you are even a part of the Witch's Guard, Layla. You hate it."

Falon put her head against the wall and quietly put her two daggers away.



“I was forced to join like a lot of us were. I have to give them one more year. Then I’m free of it. I just need to stay alive until then.”

Their voices started to fade as they moved away from Falon. She shook her head and clicked her tongue in disgust. She couldn’t believe they were now forcing people to join the Witch’s Guard. If there was one thing she hated, it was people being forced into something they didn’t want to do. Falon rubbed her eyes to get rid of the dark memories that were trying to push to the forefront of her mind. She needed to focus on her task and save James.

She waited until the sound of the footsteps faded completely. She was amazed at her luck when she didn’t run into any other guards. Falon listened intently as she made her way toward the screams and voices. As she made her feet move further down the hall, her stomach was in knots. It was taking all of her willpower not to be pulled into her memories of when she had been a prisoner of Damian’s.

Falon closed her eyes, steeled herself, then checked the handle on the door. If it were locked, she would have to use a little magic from the Witch’s Stone around her neck to open it. When the handle turned easily, Falon sighed in relief. The last thing she needed was for the Witches inside the room to feel her use any power and lose the advantage. With a silent twist of her wrist, she opened the door and slipped into the room. Falon trembled, and a cold shiver ran down her spine as she glimpsed the chains and torture devices lining the walls. It was just another reminder of all the pain she suffered when she was held prisoner by Damian. Falon took her eyes away from the torture devices to look at James. He was held by his wrist with chains above his head to the wall. Blood flowed from where the cuffs of the chains cut into his wrists and from a jagged cut on his forehead. Bruises lined his face's right side, causing his eye to

swollen shut. Falon moved through the shadows to get closer to the Witches that were torturing and questioning James.

“Who were the ones involved in the fight?” The guard with dirty blonde hair spit out so harshly Falon was surprised he wasn’t spitting fire.

“I’ve told you I didn’t know any of the men who were fighting.” “I don’t know,” James croaked. His breathing was labored, a sure sign that his ribs were broken.

Falon quickly and silently moved out of the shadows to attack. She took one of the knives she had enchanted and shoved it into the guard’s kidney closest to her. The powers it was enchanted with flowed through the Witch, ending his life. Falon had seconds to react now that the other Witch’s attention was focused on her. She dove to the side, barely missing a blast of yellow power as she sent her last enchanted dagger at the Witch. The knife sank into the Witch’s throat with a squelch. She pushed the bile rising down and forced herself to her feet as the Witch fell dead to the floor.

“Red,” James said. His pain-filled voice pulled Falon out of disgust at what she had done and made her focus on what was important—getting James to safety.

“Let’s get you out of here.” Falon grabbed the keys off the dead guard’s belt and started unlocking the chains that held James’s wrists above his head to the wall. His bloody and bruised face was making Falon’s heart hurt.

“My family,” James rasped, “They said they were going after my family.”

“I figured they would. I sent Goldy after them.” Falon slung one of his arms around her neck and helped him to his feet.

“I hoped you would. I never thought you would be stupid enough to come in here after me, though.”

She chuckled. "I never claimed to be smart. Besides, you've looked after us for a long time now. It was time I returned the favor." Falon steadied herself and James and started forward with a lot of his weight on her. Sweat formed on her brow as pain radiated from the wound on her side.

They made it out of the room and down a corridor before they were blocked. Falon slowly moved her hand toward her bag to grab one of her stunning devices, but before she could do anything, her eyes landed on a dark shadow dropping from the rafters behind the guard.

"Remove your hand from the bag and remove your hood," ordered the Witch standing before them.

Falon shook her head when the Witch repeated the order. She slowly removed her hand from the bag, but her eyes didn't move from the dark figure behind the Witch. A blast of purple power soared past her head, hitting the wall behind her and causing a shower of dust to fall around her and James.

Falon slowly moved her hand to her hood and pulled it off her head, causing her red hair to spill out of her tie and over her shoulders.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the Princess of Thieves herself. Falon." The Witch grinned. "There's a high price on your head."

Falon raised an eyebrow at him, but she refused to respond. There was nothing to say. She had earned the title Princess of Thieves and the price on her head. She hid in a tavern full of different shady characters and paid people off not to remember she was there.

"It was stupid for you to come here," the Witch said in disgust.

"It's stupid for you not to look behind you," the dark figure said.

The Witch turned quickly, but it was too late. The dark figure used some power to throw the Witch into the wall. Falon watched the Witch crumple to the ground, unmoving.

“I worry about your mental state.”

Falon scoffed as the dark figure took off his hood, revealing Aidan.

“Again with the insults,” Falon muttered as she stumbled a bit as James’s weight became more of a burden on her.

“Let me take him.” The man stepped up and slung James’s other arm over his shoulder, relieving Falon of the weight.

“Thank you. I’ll take point,” she said, taking her bow off her shoulder and arming it with an arrow. “I’m Falon.”

“I heard,” he said back stiffly. “The Princess of Thieves.”

Falon rolled her eyes and stopped moving, holding her hand up to cease the movement of the two men behind her. The torches in the dark corridor cast shadows on the stone walls, and the stone floors were causing their footsteps to echo.

“Stay here. I’m going to check ahead before all of us move forward.”

Aidan grabbed ahold of Falon’s arm. “We need to stay together,” he hissed.

“I need to ensure it’s safe for James before moving. Stay,” Falon pointed to where they were standing and glared at Aidan.

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Aidan watched as Falon disappeared down the long corridor. He shouldn’t have let her go off alone, but she was right. For all he knew, she had saved him for some reason that was unknown to him. Some reason that could cost him. He just hoped that the little human would come back and didn’t leave him here alone with James.

“She’s a good girl, that Red,” James rasped.

Aidan looked him over and took in his pale complexion with sweat on his forehead.

“They worked you over a lot, didn’t they?”

James nodded. “I’m tougher than I look.”

Aidan smirked. “What did they want?”

“Wanted to know who was involved in the fight.”

“Why didn’t you just tell them?”

“That would have implicated my Red and Goldy. They’re good girls, those two. They help a lot of beings around these parts. Take a lot of hits for those who can’t fight back. I couldn’t be doing that. I wouldn’t turn them in for nothing.”

Aidan’s eyes widened. James was willing to die to protect them. He was ready to die to protect thieves. But why was the price on Falon’s head so high if they were only thieves? There had to be more that James didn’t know.

“It’s clear,” Falon whispered when she came back. She had put her hood back on so that her face was again in shadow.

Aidan helped James down the hall, following closely behind Falon until they moved into a darkened room. Falon opened a window and climbed out of it.

“I’ll help you get him out.”

“I can do it on my own,” James whispered indignantly.

“You can’t even walk on your own. Let me help you,” Falon insisted.

James relented, allowing Aidan and Falon to help him out of the window.

When James was clear of the window, Aidan followed behind him. They needed to get out of this town quickly before any other guards discovered James was missing. Aidan grabbed Falon's arm gently when she went toward the East side of the town.

"We need to go the other direction," Aidan whispered urgently.

Falon shook her head. "My partner will meet us in a safehouse east of the town."

"Well, my partner is meeting me west of town," Aidan growled.

"Then go west," Falon looked around and led the way into a dark alley that kept them out of view. "James's family will be east of town as well. He'll go with me."

"There are more guards at the east gate. It will be harder to get out."

"I realize that." She looked at Aidan and motioned for him to move. "Sit James down. I'm going to look him over. He can't keep going in this condition."

"I'm...fine," James croaked.

"No, you're not. I will try and relieve the pain or as much of it as possible Goldy will be able to do more." Falon knelt in front of James and took one of his hands in hers before wrapping the other around her Witch's Stone. She closed her eyes and said an incantation that would allow her to heal James enough to allow them the ability to escape. It wasn't a spell she could use on herself or one she even liked to use because it used a lot of strength, but it needed to be done.

Aidan watched Falon closely and was in awe when the hand touching James began to glow. "How...how are you doing that? That shouldn't be possible."

As the incantation flowed from her, James was covered with a soft, warm glow that started closing up the wound on his forehead and helping his breathing. Falon used the power as long as she could before it became too much for her. Sweat fell from her forehead as she stopped

the spell. She looked at James and smiled. The color flooded his cheeks again, causing him to look much better.

Falon didn't answer. She never did when others asked her questions like that. She just moved to the end of the alley and looked out. "He should be well enough to head east now. There's a secret passage that Goldy and I use to get in and out of town. We need to get going. I want to be long gone before the sun begins to rise."

"Us going East will be a suicide mission. For a human, you're-

"I suggest you don't finish that sentence," Falon cut through Aiden's words like a knife piercing him with a glare that would have keeled over a weaker man.

Aidan was captivated by the little human's eyes. He was so fascinated that he lost his train of thought and forgot the argument. "Your eyes are turning red." He leaned a little closer. "Then changing back to brown. I have never known a human to have eyes that changed colors."

Falon closed her eyes to get control of her emotions. Her eyes only changed colors when she was on the verge of losing her temper. "They are changing colors because you're angering me." When she opened her eyes again and met Aiden's, she was again under control of her emotions. "If you do not wish to go east with us, that is fine. We don't need or want your help. I prefer to stay far away from those who think humans are lesser beings anyway. That mind frame landed us in these difficult times, to begin with."

"You are very infuriating." As Aidan spoke, he moved away from Falon and looked out of the darkened alley into the town square they would have to navigate to head toward the Eastern gate. There were guards everywhere, and it would only be a matter of time before they realized there had been a breakout.

“How will we get through the square without being seen?” James asked, his voice sounding more robust than it had previously.

“A distraction, of course,” A mischievous grin graced Falon’s lips, causing two reactions in Aidan: attraction and fear.

“I don’t think I like that smile much.”

A chuckle escaped Falon as she looked around the alley. “As soon as the guards are busy, get James to the Eastern gate. There is a secret hatch to a tunnel behind the statue of Jefferies the Great. Touch the craved Witch’s stone around his neck, and the hatch will appear and open. I’ll be there shortly.”

“There’s a hidden hatch and tunnel?” James asked as he made it to his feet slowly. Falon and Aidan both could see the pain cross his face and knew that he needed real medical attention before long.

“How else do you think us thieves get out of the city without being caught so often?” Falon winked at James before doubling back to find a way onto the shop next to them. She needed on the roof for her distraction to work. She only hoped that the man Arianna had gotten her stuck with would follow her directions. She wasn’t one to usually put so much trust in someone so quickly, but the only way any of them was going to make it out of this town without being captured or killed was for Falon to trust the Fae Bounty Hunter.



## Chapter Three

Aidan didn't know whether to be aggravated or impressed with the little human. She was making his life more complicated than necessary. If she had only listened to him, they could already be out of the city, however, now he was stuck with James alone, and she was probably either getting captured or killed. A heavy sigh escaped him as he waited for the sign of her so-call distraction. Whatever that might be.

"You can trust, Red," James spoke up in a voice tinged with pain. "It might cost her, but she will make sure that the both of us escape. It is who she is."

"What do you mean, cost her?" Aidan asked, eyebrows scrunched as James drew his attention from the square.

"Red has been hurt and captured before because she puts her life on the line for those persecuted. She doesn't think about herself."

"And that's the woman I just let go off on her own to do the distraction," Aidan pinched the bridge of his nose. "It'll be a miracle if she doesn't get herself captured, and I have to go save her."

"She'll be fine. She's smart and determined." James looked toward the roof line.

Aidan followed James's gaze and found the little human running across the roofs. His stomach tightened as he watched her leap to the next roof. "What is she doing?" He almost stepped out of the alley and would have done that if James hadn't grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"Stay in the shadows, or you'll be seen," he hissed. "Trust, Red."

"Trust is hard for me. Aidan was ready to go to her aid if he needed to. He just knew that at any moment, she would fall, and he would have to give up his and James's position by using

some of his power to save her from certain death. Especially when she jumps from roof to roof like she is invincible.”

Aidan and James watched as Falon stopped on the roof next to the clock tower. “What is she doing?” James asked in a whisper.

The men watched as a soft glow seemed to radiate from Falon. Aidan knew they wouldn't have noticed if they hadn't known where she was and weren't focused on her. What he couldn't figure out was what the glow was.

“I don't know,” He said slowly. They watched Falon closely until the soft glow turned into a sudden blaze. Aidan groaned. “She set the clock tower on fire.”

“That will definitely be a distraction.”

“Yes, it will.” Aidan heard shouts from all corners of the square. It wasn't long, and men and women ran toward the clock tower. The East side was clear. Everyone was now focused on the inferno she had started in the city center. Falon had done her job. For someone who was apparently for helping people, she was about to hurt many people with that fire she set. Hopefully, Falon wasn't one of the ones who got hurt.

Aidan helped James across the chaotic square. Beings were running past Aidan and James, not paying them any attention. It took them longer to get to the statue than Aidan would have liked, but finally, they made it. He quickly scanned the area to ensure no one was paying them attention before finding the button Falon had mentioned earlier. Once the hatch was opened, he helped James into the tunnel and swiftly followed him. Now they just had to wait for Falon.

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Falon wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand as she used the power of the Witch's Stone to control the fire she had started. She wanted to cause a distraction and give them time to escape, not kill any innocent beings. Falon would kill if there were no other option but to kill the innocent when against everything she believed in. She would sacrifice herself before letting someone innocent perish. Falon slid along the edge of the roof line trying to make sure the light of the fire didn't land on her. Falon moved into the shadows more as more and more beings showed up to get control of the fire. If she weren't careful, they would sense the Witch's Stone's power and find her hiding before she could get away. All Falon needed to do was keep control of the fire long enough for the others to gain control, then make her escape. Easy enough.

"How did this get started?" One of the witch guards shouted from below.

Falon couldn't hear the response to that question, but she listened to the words that followed. "We'll figure it out later. Get the fire under control before it spreads to the rest of the town!"

Falon felt other powers surrounding the fire and let her power drop. She felt drained and knew that it was going to take everything in her to get safely out of town. It had taken way too much power to keep the fire under control. She should have come up with a different distraction; if she had had more time, she probably would have. However, they were limited in time.

With great difficulty, Falon made her way off of the roof and down every dark alley she could until she had no choice but to hurry across the square. She hoped that everyone was too busy with the fire to notice her. The fear that always crept into her at the prospect of being caught only added to her weakness from using so much power. Falon knew she would have to push herself to make it to the tunnel and the rest of the way home. When she reached the statue of

Jefferies Falon, her eyes scanned the area. She needed to make sure that no one was paying her any attention. It would not be a good idea for the thieves to lose their advantage by having a secret entrance and exit to the city, even if they used it more as an exit than an entrance. When Falon was sure that no one was paying her any mind, she pushed the button that would allow the hatch to open, then swiftly slipped into the tunnel before it shut tight. The darkness consumed her and pressed in on her before a light appeared ahead of her.

“I was about to come back for you,” Aidan said as he used his Fae abilities to cause a ball of light to hover above the palm of his hand.

“Where’s James?” Falon asked as she looked around Aidan for any sign of not only James but Ariana and James’ family.

“I left him further down the tunnel so he would be safe if someone happened to stumble across the opening.”

Falon gave a slight nod. “That was smart.”

“I am known for my intelligence. Unlike-”

“I swear by all that is good in this world; if you say me, I will use what little strength I have left to throw you through the tunnel wall!” Falon snapped as she moved into Aidan’s space. She was sick and tired of this man insinuating that she lacked intelligence. She had reached the point where she was tired and angry. Those two were never a good combination for her. She could feel her control slipping and the things she kept at bay, the powers she kept suppressed and buried down deep, trying to surface. She closed her eyes and tried to reign in her anger. She didn’t need to explode in this tunnel.

Aidan watched Falon as her eyes drifted closed. A tick in her jaw started as she clenched it tightly. The little human intrigued him. He was fascinated by her grit and fire and her ability to

stand up to him when Fae, who had been around ten times longer than she had feared, even spoke around him. What made her so different?

“Are you feeling well?” “You’re pale,” he said, raising the light to take in her complexion. Dark circles contrasted with her pale skin, and beads of sweat had formed on her forehead.

“I’m fine,” Falon hissed through her teeth. She slowly opened her eyes, giving him a menacing look as she did. This Fae could get under her skin faster than anyone before him. “Come. We have a long way to walk before we can rest.” Falon moved past Aidan and started walking down the dark tunnel.

“Let me take the lead. I have the light.”

“I don’t need-”

“Are you always this stubborn, or is it just because I’m a Fae and you’re a human.”

Falon jerked around and stomped toward Aidan, all her fury focused on him. The air started to crackle with the energy coming off of her. “I don’t care what you are! And don’t ever say otherwise. If I don’t like you, it is because of you personally, not because of what you are! You are a high-handed, big-headed jerk who is too full of himself! And I don’t ask for help from people I don’t know I can trust! Is that all clear to you!”

“Crystal. You were loud enough for everyone to hear you within a mile of our location.” it is probably clear to everyone above and in the tunnel as well,” Adian said dryly.

Falon threw up her hands in aggravation before storming off into the darkness.

Aidan found it highly intriguing that minor things could set the little human off. And what was even more fascinating to him was that he enjoyed getting a rise out of her. He purposely said things to see what exactly would set her off. It was gratifying. When Aidan

caught up with Falon, she walked at a more sedate pass. He heard her mumbling to herself and had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing at her, actually laughing. He hadn't wanted to laugh for a long time, but this woman had him wanting to do just that.

"You did all of that on purpose, didn't you?" She asked, her voice clipped with annoyance.

"Maybe a little. You are easy to get stirred up. It entertains me."

"Entertains you?" Falon asked, stopping in her tracks and turning to look at Aidan.

"Entertains?" Her voice wasn't harsh or cruel sounding; it sounded perplexed. "I am not some attraction. I am not something to amuse you like a pet."

Aidan scrunched his eyebrows together as he watched her expression. She was trying to hide it, but she was upset right now. "I didn't mean for you to take it that way." He held his hand up more so he could look into her eyes. They were a mix of brown and red at the moment. The colors swirled together in her eyes. "I am sorry that I upset you." He hadn't apologized to someone in years. Why was he apologizing to her?

Falon's eyes widened for a moment before her face returned to its normal state of being emotionless. The tension left her body a bit, but something about this Fae kept her emotions on the surface. She couldn't seem to keep them at bay or keep him from being able to bring them out. Why couldn't she stay emotionless around him?

"You didn't."

"You put up a lot of shields, don't you? You try to keep others from seeing the emotions inside of you."

Falon scoffed. "Most people do. Or at least smart people do. And I'm not the only one who puts up shields. You don't show emotion either," she said, waving at his face. "You are just

as guarded as me. Come, we need to get to James and get him to his family. Ariana will be getting worried.”

The walk to James was silent; Falon and Aidan lost their thoughts. Once they collected James, they continued down the long, musty, dark tunnel in silence. Aidan led with the light in his hand, and Falon brought up the rear. Tiredness was seeping into Falon’s very bones as she went further into the darkness and down the corridor thieves had made many years ago. The sound of her stumbling drew Aidan’s attention and caused him to look over his shoulder. He held the flame higher to get a glimpse of Falon’s face.

“Are you well?”

“I’m just tired.”

“Do we need to rest for a moment?” James asked as he paused and leaned heavily against the wall. He was struggling with the pain of his injuries as much as Falon struggled with her tiredness.

“We are almost to the end; then we can rest for the night.” Falon moved to James’s side.

“Let me help you.”

“You can barely stay on your own feet. How will you help him?” Aidan asked and looked ahead, hoping to see the end of the darkness. If the end was close, he couldn’t see it.

“I will manage,” Falon said, an incantation under her breath that brought her stone to life once more. The glow filled the tunnel with light as the power flowed from the stone into her and down to her hands. She laid onto James to give him enough strength to keep moving.

Aidan quickly jerked his head around to find the source of the light. Eyes widening in disbelief at the bright blue stone around Falon’s neck that was now glowing, he quickly grabbed hold of her and pulled her away from James. “Are you insane?” He snapped, gripping her

shoulders and shaking her a bit. “You’re a human! Using a witch’s stone like that could kill you! No wonder you can barely stand! Have you been using that thing all night?” Every word he threw at her was so loud it was echoing off the walls and causing dust to rain down on them from above.

“Last I checked, I’m not hard of hearing. There is no need to shout at me in that manner.” Falon tried to wiggle out of his grasp, but his grip on her tightened. “And if you don’t let go of me, I will not be responsible for my actions,” her voice vibrated in a deadly tone.

Aidan kept his eyes focused on Falon’s. “That thing is not made for humans. It is going to kill you if you keep using it. Do you understand that? Or is that too difficult of a concept for a little human like you to comprehend?”

“That’s it,” Falon growled.

Aidan felt a massive amount of power hit him. He was picked up off his feet and flew into the tunnel wall behind him.

Anger gave Falon a boost of energy that she hoped would get her to the end of the tunnel and the area where she could get some rest. She stepped toward Aidan, still fueled by her anger. “I dislike being spoken down to or treated like I’m stupid. I know more about this stone than you ever would, and I know my limits.” Falon said all of this through gritted teeth. “Don’t ever assume things about me, especially that you are more intelligent than me.”

Aidan made it to his feet as power started forming in his hands. He had had enough of this human. Her attitude and lack of ability to think things through were enough to drive the most patient of men to lose their tempers, and he was far from the most patient of men. All Aidan wanted to do was help, yet he was stuck with a woman who would not listen to him and was bound and determined to get herself killed by the end of the night. He closed his fists as his



power built and began to make his hands glow red. He felt his neck tingle, which let Aidan know his powers were to the point of exploding.

Aidan and Falon stood toe to toe, both of their powers causing the air to crackle with the effects of it. “You are a brave little human to think it’s wise to throw a Fae Bounty Hunter into a wall. Especially one not known for his ability to control his temper.”

“I have no idea who you are or what you are known for, and I don’t care. All I care about is getting James to his family and not being spoken down to. I am not someone you can push around or control. I won’t back down even from Fae Bounty Hunters. You would do well to remember that because I will die before I ever get treated like a lesser being again.”

The look in Falon’s eyes pulled some anger out of Aidan. The tingling in his neck began to fade as he stepped back from her. “Who hurt you so badly?”

Falon blinked a few times, taken back by the question. She swallowed hard as flashes of her time in prison went through her mind. The pain, the darkness, and loneliness of those days and nights were seeping, pulling at her to bring her back into the past. She shook her head and turned back to James. She looped his arm around her shoulders and started walking once again.

Aidan followed behind her, trying to think of a way to learn more about this mysterious woman. Something had happened to her in the past that caused her to put ten-foot walls between everyone around her, but what could it have been? He had lived over a hundred years and had not only seen some awful things but had done some things he wasn’t proud of, but what could this little human that couldn’t be any older than twenty-five have seen and lived through in such a short time?

Aidan let the power out of his hands and caught up with Falon and James. He took James’s other arm and looped it around his neck to help Falon with him. “I’m sorry,” he

muttered. He was doing that a lot. Apologizing. He never apologized. And he had apologized to her twice, or was it three times now?

“I guess I shouldn’t have thrown you against the wall.” She sighed heavily. “I don’t like being belittled or talked to like I’m stupid.”

“I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that. Besides my friend, I don’t talk to other beings much. The only others I speak to are the ones I’m tracking. I guess it has affected my social skills.”

“I never had excellent social skills, and I have grown up around many types of beings. However, I’ve never had anyone bring out my temper faster than you. I usually don’t show any emotions.”

“No, she doesn’t. Not even a smile. I’ve seen more emotion in her the past hour than I have in three years,” James added as they all finally came to the end of the tunnel.

“I thought you said we would have somewhere to rest when we reached the end. All that is here is a dead end,” Aidan said as he held up his hand and formed the ball of light.

“Take James’s full weight.” Falon moved out from under James’s weight and to the wall. She moved her hand along the rough wall until she came across the smooth stone concealed with a spell. She pushed the button and watched as the hidden door slid open, showering them all with dust. Falon coughed and waved her hand in front of her face to clear the air a bit of the dust that had been stirred up. She looked over her shoulder at Aidan and James. “This way.”

## Chapter Four

As they stepped into the dimly lit room, Falon was nearly knocked to the ground when Ariana launched herself at her. “What took you so long?”

“We ran into some complications. And shouldn’t you have seen that?” Falon asked as she steadied herself with one hand on the wall next to her.

“You know I don’t see everything. Especially when I’m tired.” Ariana moved back and looked her friend over. “You look even more exhausted than you did at the tavern. You’ve used too much power, haven’t you?”

“More than likely. That is of no concern right now. Right now, James needs your attention. He was badly beaten.” Falon slowly sat down on one of the cots that lined the walls. Aidan had helped James over to a cot near his wife and children. She watched as he moved back, and Aidan’s partner knelt and began looking James over.

“Cale is a healer as well. He can look James over. I need to look at your wound and see what other damage has been done since we separated.”

“We need to get defenses up first. I don’t want us to worry about anyone sneaking up on us while we all try to get some rest.”

“The defenses are already in place. Now, slip off your cloak and corset.”

Falon’s face turned crimson at the mere thought of undressing even a bit in a room full of people. “There are other people in this room.”

“You had taken your corset off around others before when I needed to see your wounds. And I’m not giving you an option. I need to deal with your wound properly before it becomes infected. Magic can only hold it together for so long before your body will reject the magic. You know this, Falon.”

“I know, I know.” Falon unhooked the fastens that held her cloak together and let it slip from her shoulders before working on the silver hooks that had her corset in place. The pain caused to unhook made her realize how badly she was injured. If she was hurting this much already, then the wound she received while rescuing Aidan in the tavern was more intense than she had realized. When the last hook gave, and Falon let the corset fall to the cot, the cut began to bleed more freely. With the pressure the corset was giving to the wound gone, Falon was losing a lot of blood very quickly. She placed a hand down on the cot to keep herself from falling over as a wave of dizziness hit her.

“This is not good. The wound is a lot deeper than I first thought. Lie down so I can tend to it more easily. And before you pass out. You’ve gone from pale to ghostly. You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I feel as if I might.” With the aid of Ariana, Falon slowly laid back on the cot and closed her eyes as Ariana raised her shirt and began cleaning her wound and working on stitching it up.

“You’ll need to sleep and replenish your strength before we continue home. If you push yourself too much, you could cause yourself more damage.”

“We have people that are counting on us. We need to get them to safety. Plus, if we stay gone too long, everyone from home will think something went wrong with the mission and begin to worry. The last thing we need is for either of our families to come to our aid. They have been paranoid enough lately about us going out on our own.”

Ariana chuckled a little. “Can you blame them? The last mission we went on together didn’t exactly end well.”

Falon snorted. “Didn’t exactly end well? We had to hide in the trees for two days while we waited for the enemy to give up looking for us. Not to mention it was in the middle of a rain storm.”

“It was not ideal.”

Falon opened one of her eyes and peered at Ariana. “Not ideal? Two days in the pouring rain...in a tree is more than not ideal, Ariana. And all because you had a vision that we were needed in New Crest.”

“We were needed. We needed to go there and end the plans of Damian, which we did, and we were able to set free several prisoners. All in all, it was a very successful mission. It just had a few bumps along the way. Nothing to complain about. We both ended up being fine. I don’t know why you complain so much?” Ariana muttered as she finished stitching Falon up. “You would think I took you into life-and-death situations every day.”

“Not every day. At least once a week, though,” Falon teased.

Ariana laughed. “Only if it is a slow week.”

Aidan and Cale both turned at Ariana’s laugh. Aidan was confused about what could be funny enough to laugh about. They were in a situation he was not happy about being in; James was not in good shape, and Falon looked awful. Aidan stood from his place next to Cale and walked over to Ariana and Falon. He knelt next to the cot Falon was lying on and brushed his hand across Falon’s forehead before he could stop himself.

“She burns with fever.”

“Yes, I know. Once I finish with her wound, I’ll put some medicine on it, then give her a tonic to help bring the fever down.”

“Her wound?” Aidan’s eyes scanned Falon until they reached the wound on her side. A frown creased his lips as he took in the blood that streaked her side and the angry knife wound that stood out against the stark paleness of her skin. “Is that from when I hurt you?” He asked as he began to be filled with more guilt than he had felt in a long time.

“Yes, her corset was keeping enough pressure on the wound that it didn’t bleed as much as it would normally have. When she took the corset off, it bled more freely. I’ll clean it up once I tie this stitch off.” Ariana finished stitching Falon and ensured the stitches were secure before getting up to get some water and cloth to clean her with.

Aidan stayed by her side, looking down at her with worried-filled eyes. “I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve had worse. Much worse. Besides, you thought I was attacking you at the time.” Falon opened her eyes and looked up into Aidan’s. Up to this point, she would have loved to know that he felt guilty for what he did, but now seeing his green eyes filled with worry for her, something changed inside her. Those eyes did something to her stomach that she didn’t like. She didn’t like the feelings he could stir inside of her. She was supposed to be emotionless. However, she was finding that extremely difficult around the Fae next to her.

“Go get some food and rest. I’ll look after Falon.”

“Someone should put up defenses first if we’re going to rest here for a while,” Cale said as he came over to the three. “As soon as you drop your guard is the moment you get yourself killed.”

“Agreed, which is why this place always has protection. Our people saw that when we built it. We have several of these all over.” Ariana finished up Falon’s wound before covering her with a blanket. “Get some rest. I’ll bring you some food.”

“I need to. “

“You need to do nothing but rest,” Aidan said sternly. “You won’t be able to travel in the morning if you don’t rest.”

Ariana had great difficulty holding back the smile that wanted to appear on her lips as she watched the stare-off between Falon and Aidan. She had never seen her friend show so much emotion around a stranger. However, Falon was showing a lot of emotion right now. She was glaring at Aidan like she wanted to stab him in the face.

Aidan was not one to be distressed by a mere slip of a woman, but he was very distressed by Falon. Cale was having the same difficulty keeping a smile off his face as his friend crossed his arms in front of his chest and had a stare-off with the woman in the bed. Ariana and Cale watched as the two continued to glare at one another.

“Falon, rest. I will check on our other guests and make everyone something to eat. If you don’t rest, then when we get home, I will be telling your father and brother how stubborn you were.” Ariana threatened her eyebrow, quirking up as she spoke.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, but I would.” She beamed. “Now, stay in bed and rest. I’ll be back as quickly as I can.” Ariana skipped off as she left Falon’s side.

Falon huffed and looked up at the ceiling. “That was a low threat,” she muttered.

“If it keeps you in that bed and resting, it is needed.” Aidan took in her pale face and reached down to touch her skin. She was hotter than she had been when he first felt her skin.

“Your fever has gotten worse.”

Falon pushed his hand away. “It hasn’t gotten worse. And I don’t like being touched.” Where he had touched her, she felt tingles along her skin, and she couldn’t process the reaction to him she had. She didn’t know if she enjoyed his touch or not.

“Aidan, why don’t we leave her to get some rest? You won’t rest until you double-check the defenses.”

Aidan nodded. “Let’s go.” He followed Cale toward the others and stopped when Ariana approached them.

“Where are you two going?” She tilted her head and stared at the men in confusion.

“We’re going to look over the defenses. I need to make sure that they’ll hold up against Fae.”

“Of course, they will. Why wouldn’t they?”

“Fae and Witch powers are different from one another. If the defenses aren’t done correctly, then any Fae could walk through the defenses.” Cale tucked a piece of Ariana’s hair behind her ear. “It won’t take us long.”

Ariana pulled her necklace from around her neck. “You’ll need this to get back inside.” She stood on her tiptoes, and after Cale ducked his head, she put the necklace around his neck. “It is the only way to open the doors.”

Cale touched the green stone around his neck and smiled. “How does everyone else get in here if you have to use a witch’s stone?”

Ariana smiled and returned to working on the food instead of answering the question. Before Cale could ask her another question, Aidan pulled on Cale’s arm, leading him away from her and toward the exit that they would be leaving out of tomorrow. As soon as they exited, Aidan felt the power of the defenses at his back. He turned to try and see how difficult it would be to go back inside. The problem was now he couldn’t even know where the entrance to the hideout used to be.



“Can you tell where the door is?” Cale asked as he looked around. “I can’t even tell where we came out at. It’s like the forest even shifted around us.”

“That seems to be what it did.” Aidan was impressed by the spells that had been used. He had never seen anything like it before and had been around for a long time.

“Impressed?”

“Shouldn’t be resting?” Aidan asked as he turned to face Falon, who was leaning against a tree heavily.

“I should be, but after hearing you two were coming outside, I thought I should follow. You’d have difficulty getting back inside even with Ariana’s witch’s stone unless you know our tricks.”

“How is this possible?” Cale asked, waving at where he thought the door should be. “You ended behind us, but we came from that direction.”

“Did you?” She smirked. Falon pushed off the tree and moved toward them. “The spells that guard the hideout will turn you around when you exit. It also hides the door.”

“How is that possible? I have seen magic by both Fae and Witches, and I’ve never seen anything like this before,” Aidan looked around, trying to see if he could find the entrance. He touched the flat surface of the mountain wall facing them, but he could sense nothing.

“It isn’t Fae or Witch magic. It is intertwined to form stronger protection than the two could do alone.”

Aidan and Cale looked at Falon as if she had lost her senses.

“It’s amazing what can be accomplished when Beings set aside their hatred for one another and work together.” Falon put her hand to her side as pain shot through her like lightning.

“We should get you back inside. You need to rest.” Aidan moved, so he was standing right in front of her. He looked down at her, and without thinking, he brushed a piece of her red hair out of her face. “You look like you’re about to pass out.”

Falon’s breath caught in her throat as Aidan’s fingers brushed against her cheek to move the piece of hair out of her eyes. She swallowed with incredible difficulty. She couldn’t understand what this Fae did to her, but there was such a strong pull between them that she didn’t know how she would be able to keep herself from making a fool of herself around him. Aidan and Falon kept their eyes locked on each other, neither of them speaking again. They did not understand why they were being drawn to one another.

“I’ve never heard of Fae and Witches working together like this before,” Cale spoke, breaking the spell that was weaving between Falon and Aidan. Falon moved a step back from Aidan breaking any contact the two had, and looked over at Cale.

She cleared her throat to give herself time to get her emotions under control. “Fae, Witches, and Humans all work together where we’re going. We’re all equals there, and we all work towards bringing that same equality to those outside our home. No matter the cost.”

“Is that what you were doing tonight?” Cale asked as he and Aidan followed behind Falon to a section of the mountainside far from where they had exited.

“What do you mean?” Falon asked as she used some of the power of the witch’s stone to open the door. She stood back to let Aidan and Cale inside first before following in after them.

“The reason you were in the tavern tonight,” Aidan added.

“Ahh...no, tonight we were there for another reason. However, our plans were changed by you two.”

“Why did you save us? You had no reason to believe that we weren’t the enemy,” Aidan asked as he placed his hand on Falon’s arm, stopping her from going further.

“Ariana.” It was the only explanation Falon was going to give. If Ariana wanted to tell them more, she was more than welcome to give that information out. However, it was not Falon’s secret to give out. It was not her right to tell anyone that Ariana could see the future from time to time. Ariana’s family and those closest to her, like Falon, tended to keep it pretty secretive because they all knew what it could mean for Ariana. Beings would all want to know what would happen in the future, which wasn’t how Ariana’s abilities worked. Ariana saw more paths people could take and where those paths might lead if they were to take them. Nothing was ever certain. Most of the time. It was why some of Ariana’s visions had led Falon and Ariana into challenging situations.

“That’s all you’re going to tell us?”

“Yes,” Falon looked over at Cale, “It is all I have the right to tell you. If you wish to know more, you need to speak with Ariana. It will be up to her if she chooses to tell you more. Now, we all need to eat and get some rest. No one will disturb us here tonight. None of our people are in this area, and it is too well protected for anyone else to come across.” Falon yawned and left the men talking while she returned to the cot.

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“Two weeks!” Aidan shouted as he watched Ariana pack some supplies into a bag.

“Will you keep it down,” she hissed as she looked over her shoulder at Falon, who was still asleep on the cot. “I don’t want Falon waking up yet. She needs as much sleep as possible.”

“You’re telling me it takes two weeks to get to your home?” He asked, trying to reign in a bit of his temper.

“Yes, it takes two weeks. Now, you can either back up some supplies or leave me be to do it. Either way, I need to concentrate on what I’m doing. There are more of us traveling than I am used to accommodating, and we need all my attention on the task.”

Aidan growled in frustration but quickly began helping pack supplies for all those traveling to Ariana and Falon’s home. “How are the children going to travel, plus the fact James and Falon are injured?”

“Falon will be fine, and I have looked over James’ injuries. He will be alright to travel. It will be slower than normal, but we will make it just fine.”

“Falon was restless last night and barely slept. How do you know she’ll be fine? Maybe we should stay here another day and night,” Aidan said as he looked over his shoulder at Falon again.

Ariana stopped what she was doing and looked up at Aidan. “How do you know she was restless last night?”

“I couldn’t sleep, so I kept watch. She didn’t get much rest until early this morning.”

“She never rests much when we’re not home. That’s just Falon. She’ll do better once I get her back. Now, do something useful besides pretending to help me or staring creepingly at my best friend.”

Aidan scoffed. “I am not staring-“ he stopped speaking when Ariana looked up at him with a raised eyebrow. That one look told him she knew way more about the feelings inside than even Cale knew. And it unnerved him. “That look is rather creepy in itself. The last time someone looked at me in that manner, they knew things that no one else knew.”

“Oh really?” “And what do you mean by that?” Ariana chuckled before going back to packing up supplies.

“He could see glimpses of what might happen.” Aidan rubbed the back of his neck to work out the kinks from all the stress the past few months had caused. “It always unnerved me when he looked like you’re looking at me now.”

Ariana burst out laughing. “You sound like Falon.”

“Why does he sound like me?”

Ariana and Aidan both turned to see a drowsy Falon standing next to them. “How did you sneak up on me?” Aidan asked, completely stunned that he hadn’t heard her at all.

“I’m a thief, Aidan. It’s what I do.” She shrugged but winced at the movement. “We should be already gone. Why didn’t you wake me to help you pack supplies?”

“You needed the rest. You didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Ariana, don’t worry about me so much. I’ll live. Now, what can I help you with?”

“Nothing. You need to rest and take another potion. I made it up for you already.” Ariana pointed to the small table to the side of the room. “Drink it all. I already gave James his. You both will need it to have the energy for this journey.”

Falon mock saluted Ariana, making a chuckle escape Aidan’s lips before he could control himself. Falon couldn’t help but smile when Aidan chuckled. She felt a spring of happiness well up within her with the small victory of making him laugh.

“Are you two always like this?”

“Like what?” Ariana asked as she watched her friend. Falon was focused on Aidan and didn’t notice the bright smile on Ariana’s face.

“You act more like sisters than friends,” Cale added as he approached them.

“We have been raised together, and our families are very close.” Ariana went back to packing supplies. Cale knelt next to her and began helping.

“She’s been one of the few that have been able to put up with me.” Falon picked up one of the bags that were all packed. “We need to speak before we head out,” she looked at Ariana seriously.

“You two go talk. Aidan and I can finish packing up supplies.” Cale took the bag Ariana was filling from her just as Aidan took the load off Falon’s shoulder.

“You shouldn’t be carrying anything with your injury.” Aidan put the bag on his shoulder as Falon and Ariana walked off to speak with one another away from everyone else.

“Have you seen anything I should know about before we start home?” Falon asked in a whisper once they were away from everyone else.

“I haven’t tried to look.”

“You need to try. If we can avoid trouble, we must, especially since we’ll have children.”

Ariana closed her eyes as she tried to use her abilities to see what could happen in the near future as they traveled home. Falon grabbed her arm to balance her as she swayed a little in front of her. “Ariana, are you alright?” She asked worriedly.

“There were a lot of paths,” Ariana opened her eyes and looked at Falon seriously. “But one thing is clear. If we don’t do something, we will all be captured. They’re looking for us.”

Falon nodded. “I’ll lead the enemy away so you can take them home. I’ll catch up with you closer to home.”

“You can’t...not alone.”

“You need to go with them. You’re better at healing, and James needs a healer. I’m better at fighting and tracking. I’m the best one for this job.”

“I don’t like this one bit.”

“You need someone to go with you,” Ariana said as she looked at the men. “Maybe Aidan will-“

“Absolutely not. I don’t need him with me alone for the next two weeks or longer. I might kill him,” she said in a harsh whisper.

“I don’t think that’s what you’re afraid of. I think you’re afraid you might come to care for him.”

“You know what. Sometimes you know things are annoying,” Falon said before turning and walking off.

## Chapter Five

“Get down,” Aidan said in a harsh whisper as he pulled Falon down next to him. “I told you we were letting them get too close to us.”

“They needed to get close to us so they would keep following us instead of turning back and possibly tracking the others.” Falon peered through the bottom of the bushes, trying to get a glimpse of the ones following them. She didn’t know if they were Witches, Fae, or a mixture of the two. That information would give Falon and Aidan the edge in dealing with the ones tracking them.

Aidan wrapped an arm around Falon’s waist to keep her still and close to him. She was too weak and tired from her injury to roam around, leading these Beings away from the others. The last thing he wanted was for her to get hurt again. He should have insisted he does this alone instead of letting Falon come with him.

Falon carefully moved some of the branches of the bushes so she could get a glimpse of the ones who had been tracking her and Aidan for the past few days. As she peered through the limbs, she stiffened as recognition of one of the Fae and a couple of the Witches registered in her mind.

“They went this way,” The Fae that Falon recognized spoke to the others as he knelt and looked at the tracks Aidan had made with his magic. “We aren’t that far behind them.”

“The money we’ll get for turning the princess of thieves over to Damian will set us up for the rest of our lives.” One of the witches Falon recognized said with an evil tone.

“Why has he set the bounty so high for her?” A Fae Falon didn’t recognize questioned. “She has the highest bounty out of everyone. Except maybe his son.”



At that last statement, Aidan stiffened as much as Falon had. Falon turned her head and looked at Aidan closely. His eyes were focused on the ones speaking until he felt Falon shift. He turned his head and saw Falon watching him closely. He had the urge to explain himself and almost did, but before the words came out of his mouth, Falon covered his mouth with her hand and glared at him. Aidan had almost spoken and given away their position. He looked at her apologetically and gently grabbed her hand to pull it away from his mouth. They both looked back at the Beings speaking, listening to their conversation.

“No, it’s even higher than Aidan’s. I don’t know what she did that angered Damian, but he wants her badly.”

“She’s caused trouble for Damian and the rest of us. She’s the main cause of the rebellion. Without her, it would fall apart. That’s why he wants her,” The Fae Falon knew stood once more. She couldn’t remember his name, but she remembered his cruelty. He had been one who had enjoyed torturing her when she was captured the last time.

Falon turned her head to look at Aidan once again. Was he the Aidan that this Fae was speaking of? Was he Damian’s son? And if so, what had he done to cause his father to put a bounty on his head? Falon watched several emotions go through Aidan’s eyes that confused her. She didn’t understand why he looked at her with so much concern, fear, and worry.

Aidan didn’t like all the questions he could see in Falon’s eyes. He did not want anyone but Cale to know who he was, especially Falon. He didn’t want to have her suddenly hate him. He knew she didn’t always like him, but she would hate him now.

Falon reached up and, without thought, gently ran her fingertips down his cheek. She didn’t like how upset he looked. She didn’t know why it bothered her, but it did a great deal. She watched as his eyes widened in shock before softening as they locked on hers. Aidan covered

Falon's hand that was on his face with his own and squeezed it before they both turned their attention back to the ones tracking them.

"Come, if we hurry, we might be able to have them all in custody by nightfall." The Fae and Witches took off in a run leaving Falon and Aidan alone. Falon sighed and slowly shifted to her knees to get a better look through the bushes.

"We should get out of here while we can," Falon stood to her feet, dusting off her pants as she did so.

"Falon, I need to."

"Aidan, we can discuss this later once we are safe." She looked at him and gave him a weak smile. "And we all have things in our past that we don't want others to know or judge us for. I won't judge you for your secrets if you don't judge me for mine."

Aidan couldn't help but smile. "Agreed." "Which way now?" before stepping out from behind the bushes, he looked around to ensure they were clear.

"We'll head North. The further we can lead them from home, the better it will be." Falon rubbed her side briefly before reaching for her bag behind the bush.

"Let me carry your bag." Aidan reached for Falon's bag, but she moved it away. "Falon, you're in pain."

"You have your bag to carry. And I'm fine." She flung the bag over her head with enough force to make a thud when it came across her chest. "Let's go."

"Stubborn," Aidan muttered as he adjusted his bag and began following after her at a swift pace.

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“How did they catch up to us?” Falon asked as she tried to keep her balance on the slick stone they were scaling as they made their way up the cliff. The rain pounded down on them, making the trek even more complex and dangerous.

“Less talking, more climbing,” Aidan shouted up at her as he made sure to keep an eye not only on what he was doing but on Falon as well. He knew she was exhausted and feared she would misstep and fall because of her tiredness.

Falon grunted as she pulled herself onto the top plateau they had been aiming for and rolled to her back. She closed her eyes as the rain fell onto her face cooling her skin off and giving her a little burst of energy that would hopefully get her to the next place they could rest.

“We don’t have time to stop and rest right now, Falon.” Aidan looked down at Falon as she lay on the ground letting the rain beat down her skin. She was already drenched; they both were and needed to get out of the rain and cold and get away from the ones tracking them. “We have to lose them.” He held his hand for Falon to take as she opened her eyes and looked up at him. It pained him to see how exhausted and pale she looked, but he could do nothing for her. The only thing they could do was keep going.

Falon reached up, grasped Aidan’s arm with her hand, and let him pull her to her feet. She was beyond exhausted, and they still had a long way to go before they were safe. She looked around as she tried to think of a plan, any plan that would not be them having to fight the ones that were hunting them, but in the end, she knew that was going to be the only way that they would be able to get rid of the ones chasing them.

“We can’t keep running.” She rubbed her forehead. “We’ll have to fight as much as I hate that idea. It’s the only way we’ll get them off our trail eventually. We must wound or tire them

out enough so they can't follow us for a few days. It's the only way that we will be able to get away."

"And how do you suggest we do that? You're injured, so you aren't in any condition to fight, and you can't use that Witch's Stone in your condition. It'll kill you. And I can't fight all of them on my own. I'm powerful but not that powerful." Aidan tucked some of Falon's hair back in the cape's hood and used some of his power to help dry her and her clothing that was under the cloak off. He couldn't stand to watch her shiver any longer.

"You didn't have to do that, but thank you." Falon enjoyed being a little dryer as she thought about the best move for them. "We have no choice. And I told you we all have secrets. I have some of my own. I'm stronger than I look and can hold my own in a fight. You won't be alone fighting them. Plus, I have a few tricks up my sleeves. We just need to get somewhere where we have the advantage."

"Any ideas where that might be?"

Falon adjusted the bag that, with the added weight of the water, was starting to dig into her shoulder. "I think so. An area up ahead might be a good place for an ambush." Falon and Aidan began weaving through the stones, boulders, and sparse trees as quickly as possible to put enough space between them and those following them to set up the ambush. As they got closer Falon started getting the feeling in the pit of her stomach that she was being watched. She quickly stopped and put her hand on Aidan's arm, halting him. "Something's wrong," she whispered.

Aidan scanned the area looking for any sign of a threat, but he saw nothing. "Are you sure? There doesn't seem to be anything out of place."

The feeling in Falon grew as the powers she kept buried tried to surface. They only tried to emerge for two reasons. One, she was not controlling her temper, or two, she was in danger. She knew this feeling all too well. There was danger near. "I'm telling you something is wrong." The power continued to build in her as her eyes frantically moved from area to area, looking for any sign of trouble.

"You're tired. I'm sure it's-

"Move!" Falon shouted as she pushed Aidan to the ground as a blast came toward them. She landed on top of him with a grunt as she took the hit for him. Aidan quickly rolled so he was on top of them and put a shield up just as he had in the tavern. He looked around, trying to figure out where the attack was coming from. "We have to get out of here," Falon said through the pain.

Aidan looked down at her in a panic. "Were you hit?"

"Now is not the time, Aidan. We need to get out of here!" Falon said as she tried to move. Her eyes scanned the area until they landed on the only escape. The cliff. She closed her eyes for a moment to run through her memory. There was a river below, and they should survive the fall. Should is the keyword, but the odds were better than them staying where they were at the moment. Aidan wouldn't be able to hold the shield for much longer.

Aidan tried looking Falon over, but she kept moving around. "Falon, stay still so I can see where you're injured," he demanded. "I need to know if I need to carry you when we escape." He knew they would have to do something soon because his shield was weakening. He was firm, but with all the power thrown at him, he didn't have much time left before his shield failed.

"You're not carrying me anywhere." Her eyes came back to his, and she smiled a little. "Do you trust me?"

Aidan didn't hesitate to answer the question for the first time in a long time. "Yes," he answered confidently. He couldn't explain why he trusted her, but he did. He trusted her completely.

Falon grabbed the sides of Aidan's face with her hands and pulled him down to her. She couldn't explain why she decided to kiss him, but that was precisely what she did. Falon's lips brushed against Aidan's gently for a moment before she pulled back. "Then we run to the cliff and jump."

Aidan was stunned not only by the kiss but by the feelings it filled him with. So stunned that it took him a moment to even register what she had suggested. "What?" he croaked.

"There's a river below, and it's our only shot at getting out of this alive." Falon looked over his shoulder and saw Beings coming toward them quickly. "We're out of time."

Aidan looked over his shoulder. When he saw those coming toward them, he quickly came to his feet and pulled Falon along. He grabbed her hand in his as they took off toward the cliff. Neither of them hesitated when they came to the cliff's edge to jump. As soon as they hit the water, the current's impact and rush separated Aidan and Falon from each other, pulling them under and far apart.

## Chapter Six

Falon hit the cold, icy water and lost her breath. As she went under the water and was swept away by the current, all she could think of was Aidan. She fought the current and tried to make it to shore; her only thought was that Aidan was all right. She would never forgive herself if she had caused his death. She struggled with the current and dodged rocks the best she could for what seemed like hours before she finally could grab ahold of a branch and start pulling herself to the shore. With bleeding and ripped hands, Falon could eventually pull herself out of the water. She crawled on her hands and knees as far as she could before falling into an exhausted heap. Falon wanted to lie there until she caught her breath, but Fate had other plans. She heard a crunch as someone stepped near her. Looking up, she saw a pair of boots in front of her. She listened to a maniacal laugh; then, she felt clumsily grabbed up by her hair. "Let me go, you giant oaf," Falon spat out as she grabbed the wrist of the larger one trying with what little strength she had left to break his hold on her.

"You're still a fiery thing, Falon," The Fae spat. He jerked her to her feet and pulled her close to him. "I'll enjoy having fun with you before handing you over to Damian. Now, tell me where the man you were with is." He twisted Falon's hair around his fist even tighter, hoping to make her scream out in pain, but all it caused Falon to do was glare at him in anger.

Falon could feel her eyes turning red and her powers trying to surface. She needed so much willpower to hold them back and not just let go. Not to just let her true nature come to the surface and have free reign in moments like this. However, letting her powers come to the surface and have free reign would be a terrible thing. It would not be good if she lost control. She

would have to navigate this situation carefully to avoid triggering the other side of herself. The side she kept hidden from the world.

“Where is he?” The Fae snapped as he jerked Falon up on her feet, so she was on her tiptoes.

Falon gripped the Fae’s wrist with both hands, carefully pulling some power from her Witch's Stone. She used her physical strength and the energy from her stone to loosen the Fae’s hold on her, then slammed enough power into him to throw him away from her a few feet as she stood there on shaky legs and faced the wicked Fae.

“You want to play, then let's play,” she said with an evil glare as she pulled out her knife. She leaped into action, attacking the Fae with every ounce of strength. Falon knew she would only win this fight if she tapped into the power she hated. The power that she couldn’t always control. However, with everything she had been through the past few weeks, she was running on empty, even with the adrenaline flowing through her veins.

“Stop this before I have no choice but to kill you!” Falon shouted, hoping that the Fae would stop, but all the Fae did was fight harder and laugh. Her strength was leaving her, leaving her with no other choice. She carefully started pulling her powers that she kept buried deep inside her. The only problem was once she let it rise to the surface, she lost control. Her body began to burn as fire built in her hands. She knew her eyes were red now and dancing with flames. The power flowing through her gave her a renewed strength that allowed her to attack with so much force that the Fae was thrown back away. She hoped it would be enough to keep him down, yet he returned to his feet and came at her with power in his hands. Falon tried not to kill him. She tried with everything in her. She knocked him down repeatedly, but he wouldn't



stop attacking her. In the end, she had no choice. She fell to her knees, out of breath, when the fight was over.

Falon looked over at the Fae and shook her head. “Fool,” she said to his dead body. She got to her feet and stalked away from the bodies. While the power was still strong in her and still at the surface, she would have the strength and energy to look for Aidan. It was urgent to find Aidan. If Aidan were all right, everything she had done would be worth it. A shiver ran down Falon's spine as the fight replayed in her head. A blast here, a slash with her knife there, but the final burst of power, the power she tried not to use, had been the death blow. Falon's shoulders slumped because she realized she would never be an average Human. She would always be a monster.

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Falon searched for Aidan for more than an hour with no luck. If she didn't find him soon, she not only would be out of energy, but it would also be dark. She stumbled again, nearly falling to her knees as she trudged herself around another bend of the river bank. Falon looked ahead and felt ice creep into her heart as she saw a body lying face down in the mud.

“Aidan!” she yelled as she ran towards the body with what strength she had left. Her legs burned with the exertion of running to Aidan. When she made it to Aidan, she fell to her knees in the mud, and with her hands shaking, she rolled him over onto his back. “I've killed him,” she screamed as panic started to take hold of her. Falon's mind was in such a flurry of emotion that it took her several moments before she realized that Aidan was still breathing. She closed her eyes to steady herself, and once she had regained some semblance of control, she once again looked at Aidan. Falon gently brushed his hair out of his face. She cringed when she saw the large cut on his forehead. “Okay, don't worry, I'm going to fix you right up,” Falon said as she got control of

herself. What she was about to do would take considerable strength, more than likely the rest of her strength, but she had to do it. She had to save Aidan. She used her Witch's stone to push her energy into Aidan, and only when she saw the wound on his forehead heal and his groan did she begin to relax. Aidan's eyes moved under his closed eyelids for a moment before they slowly opened.

"Oh, thank goodness," Falon said quietly as she touched his face gently with her hand. "I thought I had killed you."

Aidan started to move, but Falon put her hand gently on his chest, stopping him. "Don't move yet. I haven't completely healed you yet."

"You need to stop," Aidan said as he covered her hand. "I can see how drained you're getting." He squeezed her hand. "I'm healed enough." He was still in pain, but it wasn't anything that rest and time wouldn't cure. And a few potions from Cale would help as well. "I'm all right now, Falon." He reached up with his hand shaking and brushed a sweat-soaked hair out of her face. Her eyes were no longer her normal brown color but fire red. He had seen them start turning red before, but nothing like this. Her eyes right now looked like they had an actual fire in them. "Are you all right?"

"I-

"Well, well. I thought we'd lost you."

"Really! I can't catch a break," Falon exclaimed with a frustrated tone as she jerked her head around to face the other two chasing after them for days. She gave Aidan's hand a squeeze when he tried to move and shook her head. "Stay still. You're still not back to normal," she whispered with authority before she slowly stood up and faced the men who had chased them to the cliff.

She stood between the men and Aidan. She had not given enough strength to heal Aidan for him to get hurt by these Beings.

With so much of her strength gone, she had no control of her power as she began pulling it. Fire started forming in her hands, and as the power grew in her, it began circling her, starting at her feet.

“What...what are you?” One of the Witches asked as he stepped away from Falon in fear.

“I am the princess of thieves and someone you should never have come after,” Falon growled as she took a step toward them. With every step she took, the fire around her grew. There would be no stopping the power now that Falon had let go completely. She raised her hand as one of the Witches came at her with some powers. She could dodge the power and throw her power at him. Her power hit him so hard that he flew and landed on the ground, unmoving. The other Witch continued to move back from Falon with his hands up.

“I’m done. I won’t come after you anymore.” His voice shook with fear.

The fear in the Witch’s voice got to Falon, and she slowly started regaining control. “Instead of chasing after us and trying to hurt my people, why don’t you look at the ones you’re working for instead.” Falon slowly lowered her hands as her power started to calm down. “Leave, or you will be dead along with him,” she said, motioning toward the other Witch. The Witch nodded hurriedly before turning around and running off. Falon felt utterly drained as she turned and moved back to Aidan. “We need to get out of here,” she said slowly before kneeling next to him.

Aidan was staring at Falon in complete shock as he tried to figure out what had just happened. It was as if he had stepped into one of his dreams. Falon was the woman he had been dreaming of for years, his mate, but how was that possible? Her kind had been killed long ago.

Hadn't they? He shook his head as he tried to get control of his thoughts. He wanted to ask a million questions but now wasn't the time. There would be times when they were both safe.

"Aidan, are you all right?" Falon asked, her voice shaking not only from tiredness settling into her very bones but also from fear that now that he had seen her like that, he would fear her, hate her, or want to hurt her like so many others had before him.

"I'm fine, but we will have much to discuss when we get somewhere safe." He slowly sat up, groaning with the movement. "Do you think that Witch will stay away from us or come back with more?"

"I think he'll stay away. He's one that I've overheard complaining about the fact that he was forced into the Witch's Guard." The shaking overtook Falon's body as the tiredness became too much for her. "We need to get somewhere safe for the night. We both need rest." She tried to return to her feet but could not because she was shaking badly.

Aidan gritted his teeth to work through the pain as he moved quickly to Falon's side. "Is there somewhere near here where we can go to rest?"

Falon blinked a few times as she tried to focus on what Aidan was saying. The more her adrenaline wore off, the more tired she felt. "Umm...I think...I think there is a cave near here that has protection."

Aidan brushed some hair from Falon's face before cupping her cheeks with his hands. "Tell me where it is, Falon, and I'll get us there. I'll get us there safely, and you can rest. You've done enough," he said softly, rubbing her cheeks gently with his thumbs. "It's my turn to take care of us now."

Tears filled Falon's eyes as she looked into Aidan's. There was no hatred or fear there. There was only worry for her in his eyes. What had started as aggravation between the two of

them had somehow quickly shifted to something else, and now when he had seen her at her worst, as a monster, he still wasn't running from her. He wanted to take care of her, but could she trust him? She felt genuinely safe as he rubbed her cheeks and looked into her eyes. It was the first time she had felt safe with someone other than Ariana or her family.

"Falon, are you in pain?" Aidan asked as he brushed away a tear that slipped down my cheek. He couldn't understand why she was crying unless she was in pain. He didn't know why she was showing this emotion at all. She had kept most of her emotions in check except when angry with him.

"I don't think so." Falon's eyebrows scrunched together as she leaned forward and put her head on his shoulder. "I'm just drained." She was trying to get control of her emotions and hide the fact that Aidan had been able to reach her heart. "Give me a moment, and I can start heading toward the cave."

Aidan wrapped his arms around Falon and put his chin on her head. "Just tell me where it is, and I'll get us there."

"You won't be able to find the entrance or get into the hideout once we arrive." She yawned and tried to force herself to move away from Aidan.

"I can wake you up when we get there. Just let me take care of you, Falon." He gently kissed the top of her head.

Falon melted inside at the show of affection from Aidan. With difficulty, she stayed awake long enough to give him directions to the hideout, then slipped into unconsciousness. Aidan held her close to him for a moment before using his powers to give him enough energy to reach his feet with Falon in his arms. Usually, it wouldn't be a problem, and carrying her would be extremely easy, but he wasn't at his usual strength. Once he was on his feet, he used his Fae

powers to dry and clean their clothing the best he could. He did not want Falon to get a cold on top of everything else.

“I’m going to take care of you, Falon,” Aidan spoke softly. “I’m going to be a good mate to you from now on. I promise.”

## Chapter Seven

Falon opened her eyes and slowly sat up. She immediately noticed that they had made it to the cave, and a fire was blazing nearby. She looked around for any sign of Aidan but didn't see him. Had he left her? Had he gotten her to safety as promised, then decided to take off? Falon chewed on her lip nervously as she tried not to have a breakdown. She needed to push down her emotions and let them go. Falon had been left and hurt before and survived. She would survive this. She pulled her knees to her chest, wrapped her arms around her knees, and stared into the fire as she tried to gain control.

"Well, I see you're awake. You had me worried. You have been out for hours," Aidan said as he came into the cave, carrying wood in his arms.

Falon jerked her head toward the sound of Aidan's voice, and a warmth that had nothing to do with the fire filled her soul as she saw the smile gracing his lips. "You didn't leave."

"Of course, I didn't leave," Aidan said, his smile slipping off his face as he put the firewood on the ground. "Did you think I would?"

"I woke up, and you were gone. I thought maybe...after what you saw that you had decided to leave while I was asleep." Falon looked away from Aidan and back into the fire. "Usually, that happens when others find out about me."

"They abandon you?" Aidan sat down next to Falon. He wanted her to look at him while they spoke, but he knew he couldn't force her. She was talking to him about herself, her past. They had been traveling for days together, and although they had been getting along and getting to know one another at the moment, neither of them had been genuinely getting to know each other. Neither of them had let each other into their pasts, their secrets.

“Abandon me, try to turn me in, or try to kill me. One of those.” She shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. As if they were just talking about the weather. But Aidan knew better. He knew it was a big deal. He saw the pain in her eyes and felt the pain of her words as if it was happening to him.

“How many times has that happened to you, Falon?”

“I lost count. It’s easier not to trust and close myself off from everyone.”

“Is there no one you trust?” Aidan suddenly desired to hunt down everyone who had caused Falon pain. Who had caused her harm? He wanted to right all of the things that had gone wrong to her in the past.

“Ariana and my brother and father, I trust with everything in me. And I trust a few others at home with some things, but those three are the only ones I trust with everything.” Falon finally turned her head, so she was looking at Aidan. “But...I’m starting to trust someone even though it’s hard for me.”

Aidan brushed a curl out of her face and smiled a little. “And who is that? Is it a dastardly good-looking Fae with black hair and green eyes?” he asked teasingly.

“Well, he has black hair and green eyes.” Falon raised an eyebrow. “Dastardly? Of all the words, that’s the one you chose.”

Aidan couldn’t help but chuckle. “It sounded good in my head. I’m glad you’re starting to trust me, Falon. I hope you trust me completely because I’m not going anywhere.” He leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

Falon closed her eyes at the contact. She couldn’t stop a sigh of contentment from escaping her lips. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”



“Get past all my defenses and make me...feel.” She tilted her head to the side as she scrutinized him. “I normally don’t show any emotion around anyone, but you can bring out all of my emotions in a matter of minutes. How do you do it?”

Aidan could tell her that he was her mate, and the connection between them would help them drop all the walls they had built around their hearts, but he didn’t want to scare her off. He knew now that she wasn’t just a human. He didn’t know exactly what she was, but she wasn’t just a human, but still telling her, she was his mate might cause her to become afraid and run. He didn’t know what he would do if she ran. He knew he would chase her but did not want her to run. He wanted her to run to him.

“You do the same thing to me. I don’t normally show emotion or talk as much as I have. I think we can bring many types of emotions out in each other because we’re connected. I think fate has plans for us.” It was as close to the truth as Aidan was willing to confess. Their eyes stayed locked on one another for several moments. Falon could feel the pull between them, the connection. She could feel the warmth that his gaze caused her spreading throughout her whole body.

She finally cleared her throat and looked away. “How did you get in here?”

“After the last hideout, I knew the logistics of how it worked. So, when I arrived at the location, I used my powers, and since I was holding you, your Witch’s Stone came to life and helped me as well.”

“I didn’t know it would do that.”

“I didn’t either. I was going to try and see if I could get in since I knew how it was set up, and your necklace came to life and mixed with my powers to help me get in. It was the oddest thing.”

Falon looked around the cave. “This cave has a passage attached to it. We can take it for a few days before leaving it. It’ll be safer than being out in the open. It was where I was hoping to bring us to once we lost those tracking us.”

“Falon, we need to talk about what happened back there.”

Falon sighed heavily. “Do we have to?” she asked, dreading the conversation about what had happened.

“I think we do. You aren’t a Witch or Fae, but you had powers earlier. And they weren’t from the Witch’s Stone. The power was radiating from you. I could feel it. It was unlike anything I had ever felt before.” Aidan watched as she chewed on her lip nervously. He slowly moved his hand up and ran his thumb across her lip to stop her from worrying her lip with her teeth.

“You’re going to hurt your lip if you keep doing that, Falon.”

“If I tell you everything, will you leave?” Falon asked, sounding more like a child than the adult she was.

“I told you I’m not going anywhere. And I’m Damian’s son. I have no right to judge anyone.”

“Being his son does not make you him. But I’m a different story.” She huffed and reached up and took off her Witch’s Stone. “This was given to me when I was a child by a Witch who had taken me to protect me from those who wanted me dead. He placed it around my neck to help me survive.”

“How old were you when he did this?”

“I was three when he took me to protect me, but I was five when he put the necklace around my neck and pushed all of his power into it. All of his power but the amount of power it would take for him to send me somewhere else.”

“Send you somewhere else?” Aidan asked as he looked at the Witch’s Stone that Falon had placed in his hand. It was unlike any he had ever seen before. Most were just colored stones that hung from some type of chain. However, this one was not like that. The stone was set on a metal plate with etchings all around it. Etchings looked like some type of language that he had never seen before. He touched the etchings as he examined the necklace.

“He sent me into the future, so I was harder to find, and he gave his life to do so.”

Aidan jerked his eyes back to Falon’s face. “He what?” he asked in almost a shout.

“That’s impossible. Only one Witch was ever able to do that, and he-”

“Died a thousand years ago?” Falon asked as she kept her eyes locked on mine. “Yes, he died after sending me to safety or sending me away from the ones who were trying to kill me at the moment. Damian is one of the ones trying to kill me. Your father has been trying to kill me for a very long time. He is very persistent in his quest to get a hold of me.”

“So, Jeffries, the Witch whose statue the tunnel was under, is the one who gave you this Witch’s Stone and sent you here? Why?” None of this made any sense to Aidan. Jeffries was a stickler for the rules and didn’t believe in changing or altering anything. Sending Falon to the future changed things, even if she was just a child. Wasn’t it?

Falon looked back at the fire. “The man I call my father isn’t my real father. He is the man who found me when I was five. He has raised me and taken care of me. His wife died in childbirth along with their second child, and he was struggling with depression when he found me.” She smiled softly. “He has always told me that I was his fated daughter who pulled him and my brother out of their depression after their loss. They have taken good care of me and protected me, but it has been hard on them. Especially when I started coming into my powers, they had no clue how to help me with them.”

“Why didn’t they get someone to help you?”

“Because there was no one to help me.” Falon held out of hand towards the fire and brought her power forward. She carefully started manipulating the flames, causing them to dance around. “I’m the last of my kind.”

“You can’t be.” Aidan watched the flames dance around. He then watched as one of the flames turned into a flower before finally it turned back to normal.

“My mother was a human, but my real father was a fire elemental, Aidan.” Falon looked at him out of the corner of her eyes. She was waiting for him to react, recoil, or leave. Maybe even try to hurt or kill her. All those things had happened to her when someone had found out what she was. Her family tried not to let anyone find out what she was, but people still found out. Ariana and her family were the only ones who didn’t try to hurt her.

“You’re half fire elemental?” Aidan asked as he kept his eyes on the fire. Happiness was welling up within him. He had thought his mate was dead for as long as he could remember because he had been told his mate would be a fire elemental, and they had all been killed over a thousand years ago. After seeing Falon’s ability today, he had concluded that Falon was a gift and his second mate, and the dreams were clues to the fact that he was getting a second mate. However, he knew the truth now. Falon wasn’t his second mate. She was his real mate. His first and only mate.

“Yes...Do you hate me now?” Falon asked as she fidgeted with her fingers.

“Falon, look at me.” Aidan waited for Falon to look at him. When her eyes locked on his, he cupped her cheeks with his hands. “I don’t hate you. I could never hate you. I have dreamed about you for a very long time.”

“Dreamed about me? I don’t understand.” She didn’t understand why he wasn’t trying to get away from her. Nothing about Aidan’s behavior toward her made sense to her.

“I’ve had dreams about my mate but never seen her face. As she sings, I hear her voice in the dream and see fire wrapping around her. I’ve dreamed about you, Falon.”

Falon tried to swallow down the emotions that were building inside of her. “Aidan, I can’t be your mate. Fate wouldn’t be that cruel to you,” she said in a pained whisper. Falon would love to be with Aidan and be able to trust someone completely. To have someone there that she could rely on, but she knew her fate. Her fate was to stop Damian; in doing so, she would probably be killed.

Aidan scrunched his eyebrows together as he watched all the emotions cross Falon’s face. “Why do you say that?”

Falon ran a hand through her hair and stood up, moving away from Aidan. She needed to put some space between them so she could think more clearly. She had already told him more than she had planned to say to him. “We should get some sleep. Tomorrow we need to get as far through the tunnel as possible.”

Aidan stood to his feet and moved, standing in front of Falon. “We can rest once you answer my question.”

“Aidan-”

“No, I want an answer, Falon. Why do you say that?”

“Because my fate was decided a long time ago!” Falon snapped. “I have to stop Damian. That’s my fate and-”

“No!” Aidan stumbled backward as he finally understood what she was trying to tell him. “You think you’re going to die, don’t you?” He asked, the anger inside of him rising to a level he didn’t know was possible. He had been angry many times but never felt like this.

“We all must die eventually,” she said in avoidance.

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it,” he put his hands on her shoulders, keeping her in place when she tried to walk away again. “Tell me what you think is going to happen.”

Falon tried to shrug him off with no success. She looked up at him and narrowed her eyes at him. “Why should I? My fate was decided a long time ago. It was decided before I met you and before you were born. Do you think I want to be the one who has to fight Damian? Do you?” She asked in a shout. She was on the verge of losing complete control of her emotions. Falon avoided talking about all that was expected of her. She tried even to avoid thinking about it knowing that it would just lead to a sense of overwhelmedness that would weigh her down to the point of her inability to function or do what needed to be done.

“Then why do it? Why take it upon yourself to fight him?” Aidan would never let Falon fight Damian. He wasn’t going to let his father anywhere near Falon. He knew his father well enough to understand what Damian would do to Falon if he got his hands on her, and it would be pretty. He would die before allowing anything to happen to Falon.

“I’m the only one who can,” she said simply. “It’s what I’m expected to do. What I’ve been told I have to do.” All of this, she said with no emotion. Jeffries put the burden on her shoulders long ago, and although her father and brother tried to take the responsibility away from her, the Council had not allowed the commitment to be taken from her. They had insisted on her being trained and raised to do one job. Kill Damian and end his tyrannical reign over the Beings of their world.

Aidan stared at her in shock, completely at a loss for words. Who had decided that it was her job to take on Damian? Who had put such a heavy burden on her shoulders? It wasn't fair to ask something like that of her.

“So you see, it isn't fair to you. Fate had to of made a mistake.” Falon looked down at her feet, avoiding Aidan's gaze.

“It isn't fair to me because you think you'll die and leave me?” he finally was able to ask without shouting in anger. His voice was strained from controlling himself from yelling.

“Yes.” Falon made herself meet Aidan's gaze and hold it. He deserved to know the truth. He deserved to know why they couldn't be together.

“Falon, I need you to listen to me very carefully. I am not going anywhere and will never let you face Damian alone. If you go to face him, I'm going with you.” Aidan wrapped his left arm around Falon's waist before pulling her close. With his right hand, he brushed some of her hair out of her face. “I'm not letting you go into a deadly situation without me beside you.” He leaned down enough to put his forehead to hers. “You and I are mates, Falon, and I have waited a long time for you. I am not letting you go because you're scared.”

Falon's spine stiffened. “I'm not scared,” she said defensively. “I'm just worried that you'll end up alone.”

“I understand that, but I also think you're scared that if you let me too close, you'll start caring for me. You'll have to drop those walls you have put up, which does scare you.”

Falon tsked in agitation and went to move away from Aidan, but he tightened his hold on her. “Let me go,” she demanded.

“No, not until you understand what is going to happen. I’m not leaving, and you’re not pushing me away. I will have your back and be by your side no matter who you decide to fight or what situation you decide to get into. Do you understand?”

Falon blinked a few times as she stared at the serious look on Aidan’s face. She had never had anyone who wanted to stand by her side and fight with her. Her father, brother, and even Ariana wanted her to let go of what the council expected her to do and what Jeffries had decided was her fate. “But...he’s your father.”

“And?”

“You would fight your father?”

“I have been fighting my father for years, Falon. I disagree with what he is doing, and I want him stopped just as much as you do.” He kissed her forehead. “And if you decide to fight him, I will be right by your side fighting as well. We are mates, and we will face everything together.”

For the first time in a long time, Falon felt some of the walls around her heart crumbling. Tears filled her eyes as she continued to look up at him. “Promise?”

“I promise. We do this together.” He tilted her chin up, looking deeply into her eyes. Aidan gently ran his thumb across her lower lip before succumbing to the temptation of kissing Falon. When his lips touched hers, it was perfection, and it sealed both of their fates. They were made for one another, and nothing would tear them apart.



## Chapter Eight

“I know it’s safer to go through the tunnels, but I am tired of feeling trapped.” Aidan shivered as the walls began to feel like they were closing on him. He had never wanted to see the sky more than he wanted to right now. Four days in dark tunnels was enough to last him a lifetime.

“We’re almost to the end. I think,” Falon said as she stopped to lean against the wall. She still hadn’t fully regained her strength and needed to be looked over by a healer. “And although our home is hidden, we do have areas where we have a lot of natural light. You won’t feel so trapped there. I hope.” She looked at Aidan as he stepped closer to her. He was looking at her with worried eyes that filled her heart with an emotion that she wasn’t ready to try and decipher yet.

“We need to rest. You’re pale,” he said as she held up his hand to light up her face more. “We should have been resting more.”

“I’ll rest once we’re home. Right now, we keep moving.” Falon pushed off the wall, giving Aidan a forced smile as she did so. “I’ll live. Let’s keep-”

“Shh,” Aidan held his hand up as he listened carefully. He could have sworn he heard voices up ahead. “I heard someone. I know I did,” he whispered close to Falon’s ear. “Up ahead.”

Falon couldn’t help the pleasant shiver that ran down her spine at Aidan being so near. She steadied her breathing and made her mind focus on what he was saying. He had said he thought he heard someone. She closed her eyes to try and listen for any sounds. It took a few moments before Falon heard what Aidan had.

A bright smile split across Falon's beautiful face. Aidan couldn't help but return the smile. "I love it when you smile like that. It makes you look even more beautiful than you already are."

Falon felt her face heating up at the compliment that Aidan had paid her. She didn't get compliments often; when she did, it was from her family or Ariana. She almost forgot why she smiled in the first place until she heard the voices again.

"Oh, right," she cleared her throat. "It sounds like Ariana." Falon grabbed Aidan's hand that wasn't conjuring the light, and started walking toward the sound of the voices. When they came around a bend in the tunnel, they met with Ariana and Cade.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Ariana squealed as she launched herself at Falon. "I was hoping this would be the route you'd take."

Aidan had to put his hand on Falon's back to keep her from being knocked off her feet. "Easy; Falon isn't the strongest right now." His voice was filled with worry as he looked down at his mate. She could barely stay on her feet; she didn't need her friend hanging onto her like that.

"Are you alright? What's wrong?" Ariana moved back from Falon and started trying to look her over.

Falon quickly moved back and closer to Aidan. Aidan wrapped an arm around her waist, keeping her close to him. "I've just overdone. I'll be fine once we're home, and Jonas can look me over."

"Who is Jonas, and why will he look at my mate?" Aidan jerked his head toward Falon so quickly he was surprised he didn't break his neck. No other man was going to look over his mate. He asked in a jealous growl.

Falon looked up at him, her eyebrow cocking up a bit at his tone. “One, don’t growl at me. It’s rude. If you must know, he’s my brother and a healer. And Three, you don’t own me, Aidan. You don’t get to say who gets to look at me and who doesn’t!” The last part of that statement had come out in more of a shout as her voice filled with annoyance and maybe a tad condensation at the fact that Aidan thought he had the right to tell her who could and couldn’t look at her. The mere thought that someone thought they had the right to control her brought a bad taste in her mouth and up so many bad memories of the past that she was having trouble keeping her temper under control.

Aidan moved back enough to face off with his stubborn little mate. “One, don’t take that tone with me, Falon,” he said, mimicking how she had spoken to him a few moments earlier. “And two, are you telling me that if there were a chance some female was going to be looking me over, you wouldn’t be jealous? Because if not, we feel two different emotions toward one another.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest as he glared down at her, his nostrils flaring as his anger built. How dare she get an attitude with him? How was he supposed to know that Jonas was her brother and not some random guy?

Falon opened and closed her mouth a few times before finally getting her thoughts and emotions together enough to speak to Aidan calmly. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have taken that tone with you, but I don’t like being controlled. It brings back...bad memories,” she admitted with difficulty. She shuffled her feet as she looked down at them. “And,” she sighed heavily as if this admission was costing her a lot, “I would be jealous,” she said under her breath.

“What was that? I didn’t hear that last part,” Aidan said, a smile spreading across his face.

She huffed again and made herself look up at him. “I would be jealous. There, are you happy?”

“Ecstatic.” He bent his head to give her a quick kiss on the lips. Aidan loved how her cheeks got a touch of pink to them with that show of affection. “And I didn’t mean to sound like I was trying to control you, Falon. I have no desire to control you. I like how feisty and independent you are, even if that means you might give me grey hair at the end of this.”

Falon couldn’t help the giggle that escaped her. A stupid, girly giggle escaped at the thought of giving Aidan grey hair. He was right. She was a handful, and he hadn’t even truly realized how much of a handful she was.

“Did you just giggle?” Ariana asked as she stared at her friend, her mouth nearly hanging open in shock. Not only had Falon not thrown Aidan clear across the tunnel when he yelled at her, but she had also allowed him to kiss her. Now, her friend was giggling. Actually, giggling. “Have you suffered a head injury that I should be concerned about?” She meant it as a joke, well, for the most part, but that one sentence had the smile gracing Falon’s lips completely fade. “Falon, I-”

“We should continue. Where did you leave James and his family?” Falon had felt like a bucket of cold water had been thrown on her at Ariana’s words. Her best friend was finding her behavior odd enough to ask her questions about it, which meant that Aidan was already changing her. It wasn’t bad for her to change or show emotion to Aidan, but it was terrible around others. It would be a sign of weakness that she couldn’t afford to show. Falon had learned not to show any emotions around others for many reasons. Some of the reasons had to do with her experiences while in prison others had to do with how cruel the other beings had been toward her while she was growing up. The more emotions she showed, the worse the cruelty became. It was

only when she stopped reacting and showing emotion that they became bored with their torture and left her alone. After that, she decided it was better not to let anyone know what was happening inside her. Not to let anyone see her emotions or know how truly deeply she felt something. Ariana knew to an extent what she felt because they would speak about it, but even she didn't know everything. Falon kept so much inside of her, locked away and buried in hopes that she wouldn't have to deal with the pain it had caused.

Ariana felt awful and wanted to make it right. She tried to fix her mistake. Falon had gone from playful and happy, which Ariana hadn't seen since they were very young, back to her closed-off self. "Falon, I shouldn't have said what I did. I didn't mean-

"It doesn't matter. Now, where are James and his family?"

"We left them at the end of the tunnel so we could come looking for you." Cale saw the pain on his mate's face and didn't like it. He didn't understand what exactly was going on between Ariana and Falon. Still, if Falon were going to take away Ariana's smile and upset her, he would do whatever it took to ensure it never happened again. "And I don't like how you've cut Ariana off twice and upset her."

"Upset her?" Aidan asked, moving Falon behind him and narrowing his eyes at Cale. "Best friend or not, if you speak to Falon in any tone other than a kind one, I will deal with you harshly. And your mate," he said in a mean tone of voice, "made my mate upset first!"

"And that makes it right for her to be rude-"

"Oh, for good heavens!" Ariana snapped as she moved in front of Cale, cutting him off as she placed her hand on his chest to calm him.

"Aidan, end this," Falon moved in front of Aidan and touched his face gaining his attention. "She didn't upset me as you think."

Aidan grabbed Falon's hand on his cheek and gave it a light squeeze. "Why did you get upset then?"

"Just let it go for now. We can discuss this later," she said softly.

Aidan kept his eyes on Falon's for a few seconds before nodding. "Very well, but we will discuss it."

"I know. You don't exactly let things go." Falon gave him a little smile. "Let's get home. I could use a hot bath and a good night's sleep."

"I think we all could use those things." Ariana laced her fingers with Cale. "Let's get going. We all are tired, which worsens our tempers, and we still have at least two days of walking before we are home."

"Two days?" Aidan asked with a groan. "I thought we were almost to the end of the tunnel?"

"We are, but it is another two days of walking before we are home." Falon leaned into Aidan as he wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close. She yawned and closed her eyes. She needed just a moment to rest her eyes.

Aidan brushed a curl out of Falon's face before bending enough to scoop her into his arms. "What are you doing?" she asked as she snuggled against his chest, never once opening her eyes.

"You're tired and need some rest. I'll carry you for a bit while you do just that."

Falon yawned again, opening one of her eyes just a bit. "I'm too heavy for you to be carrying around."

Aidan looked down at her and raised an eyebrow. "No, you're not. Rest, Falon. I'll wake you up in a bit. You need to gain back some of your strength."

Falon wanted to argue with him, but she was too worn out from everything that had happened the past several days.

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“Finally,” Falon said with relief as she saw where their secret entrance was hidden. “We’re home.”

“Falon, can we talk for a moment? Privately.” Ariana asked as they stepped through the magical protective barrier that kept their cave entrance hidden and safe.

Falon looked at the ones with them and motioned for them to have a seat. “Rest for a moment. We’ll be right back.” She pulled Ariana further into the cave so none of the others would hear their conversation. “What’s going on?”

“You...you won’t let them hurt Cale, will you?” Ariana wouldn’t make eye contact with Falon as she asked that question.

Falon felt like someone had punched her in the gut as she took in Ariana’s words. She looked at Ariana and ran her hand through her hair in frustration. “What have you seen?”

“They won’t accept Cale and Aidan. They will try to kill them,” Ariana said as she watched her friend start to pace. She really should have mentioned this sooner, but she knew Falon. She knew Falon would have made sure that Cale and Aidan had left.

Falon stopped and looked at Ariana, “And you were just going to let them walk into the city. Are you crazy? Have you lost all your senses?”

“They are meant to be with us. And you can save them. I know you can,” Ariana said as she looked into Falon's eyes. “Please, Falon,” she pleaded. Ariana knew she couldn’t live without Cale. They had only been together for a short while, but they were connected, and a Witch

without their mate would be of no use to anyone. If Cale had to leave the city, she would be going with him.

“You are betting their lives on the hope that I can save them.” Falon rubbed her forehead and laughed nervously. “I wish I had as much faith in me as you do. Ariana,” Falon said quietly. Her voice had lost the angry tone, sounding more like defeat. “We can't take them with us if there is a chance they'll be killed. I won't watch Aidan die. I can't. I can't have any more blood on my hands. Especially his.”

“You won't have to. You'll stop it,” Ariana said. She gripped Falon's shoulder firmly. “Aidan is your mate, Falon. He is meant to be with you. Besides, he's as stubborn as you. I don't believe he will be leaving your side.”

Falon shook her head no. “I won't allow him to be hurt. And I still think it was cruel of Fate to put Aidan with me. He deserves someone better than me. Someone who isn't...well...a monster.” Falon rubbed the back of her neck.

“Falon, no one is better than you, and you aren't a monster. You're an amazing person. Fate has given Aidan a blessing by giving you to him. Why will you only believe the worst about yourself?” Ariana hated how her best friend saw herself. She hated that she allowed the things that had happened to her and the things that others had called her to impact how she saw herself. She would if she could take all of Falon's pain away from her.

“No, I'm a screwed-up person, not an amazing one,” Falon said as she looked at her friend skeptically. “He deserves better. And I only believe what is true.” She stalked back into the cave and found Aidan, Cale, James, Teresa, and the children waiting patiently. Falon looked at Ariana. “If I can't do this, you get them out. Is that understood?”



Ariana nodded but didn't say anything. Ariana knew that if anyone could keep the men safe and get the council to agree to allow them to stay, it would be Falon.

Falon fussed nervously with her hair, then brushed it back defiantly and looked at the group. "Come on; we need to go inside. I'm sure everyone is hungry," she said. They all headed further into the dark cave. The further they moved into the cave, the more torches appeared, and the brighter things became. When they had walked a little into the cave, Falon stopped and looked at Aidan. "Aidan?"

Aidan stopped walking and looked at Falon. He didn't like the sadness that seemed to engulf her the further they came to her home. He had thought she was excited to be home, but now he wasn't so sure. She looked defeated and like she weighed the world on her shoulders. He wanted to fix it for her, to take whatever burden away from her that was weighing her down.

"What's wrong?" he asked. He was gently brushing her cheek with his fingertips.

"You don't have to go any further, Aidan. I can't promise that it will be safe for you where we are going. Ariana... saw things and doesn't know if it will be safe for you and Cale. Our people can be very welcoming most of the time, so I don't know why this time would be different except because it has to do with me." As Falon spoke, she looked deep into his green eyes. Everything in her wanted him to stay, but she needed him to be safe. It wasn't safe for Aidan to be with her.

"I'm not leaving you, and everything is going to be all right," Aidan said as he brushed her cheek with his knuckles. "I promise. And if it isn't safe for Cale and me, then it isn't for you and Ariana. We can go somewhere else. Cale and I have been traveling for a long time. "

Falon shook her head. "No, we need to come home. Just know that I won't let anything happen to you."

At the back of the cave, they came to two large doors. Ariana said an incantation that allowed the doors to open. As they entered, they were surrounded by men with weapons. Aidan quickly stepped in front of Falon and began to pull power. He didn't know these men, and he didn't like the fact that they were threatening his mate with their weapons.

“Aidan, move to the side and stop pulling your powers. They won't hurt me. They won't hurt us.”

Aidan looked over his shoulder at Falon, “But . . .”

“It will be all right,” Falon said as she squeezed his hand and walked to the front of the group.

“My Lady,” the head guard said as he bowed to her. “Welcome home. We were beginning to wonder if you would return to us.”

Aidan and Cale both looked at Falon in shock. Why would a Fae call her Lady?

“Tomas, it's good to see you. As you can see, we have brought guests,” Falon spoke with gracious authority, giving Tomas a queenly smile. “And have I ever not come home?”

“Tomas' faith in you must be failing if he believed you would not return to us,” one of the other guards said. His smile expressed joyful relief.

Finally, the guard turned his attention to the other people in the group. He took in the Fae next to his Lady and noticed that the Fae looked like he wanted to kill someone. “You are always bringing strays home, My Lady. Come, the Council will want to see them. And it is good to have you home again,” the Fae, Jarus, said as he bowed to Falon and gave her a wink.

Aidan clenched his fist and jaw as he saw the look this impertinent man was giving his mate.

“Very well, Jarus, lead the way,” Falon said as she motioned for the Fae guards to take the lead.

Aidan came up beside her as the guards turned around. “What was all that about?” he snapped out, not happy with how the other Fae looked at her. His mind kept shouting that she was his, and they needed to get that through their heads. Aidan shook his head to clear out some of the anger. They didn't know she was his mate, so they had no reason not to look at her. The logical part of him tried to calm the illogical part that kept rearing its ugly head; however, it was not winning the battle with his irrational side. That side wanted to grab Falon into his arms and scream “Mine!” at the top of his lungs. He almost laughed as that picture entered his mind. Falon would enjoy it if he did that. Aidan rolled his eyes as his thoughts continued to go around in circles. He swore he was going insane, and it had all started when Falon came into his life.

“I'll explain later.” Falon grabbed his hand. “Stay with me, Aidan. And please don't interfere,” she said, not noticing how Aidan had snapped or how unfocused he was.

“I'll only interfere if you are in danger,” Aidan said as he laced his fingers in hers. It felt so right to hold her hand. It always felt right. If being with her meant that he lost his sanity, it was well worth it.

When Falon looked down at their hands, she suddenly realized that she had grabbed his hand in hers. “Aidan, I'm sorry,” she said so softly that Aidan almost didn't hear her.

“For what?” Aidan asked as he looked down into her face. He didn't understand the pain he saw there. He wanted her to smile, to laugh, to get some of her fire back. If this is what coming home did to her, he needed to persuade her to leave as soon as possible.

“That you met me. You would have been better off if you had never met me. You would have been happier, safer.” She removed her hand from his and hurried to keep up with the guards.

Aidan looked at her in shock. He hurried to catch up with her, but they were walking through two large doors before he could talk to her again. As they entered the room, he saw ahead of him the two guards who had spoken with Falon. They explained that Falon and Ariana had brought some people home with them.

“Bringing home strays again, My Lady,” one of the Fae men said with a laugh.

As Aidan looked around, he noticed four men were Human, four were Fae, and four were Witches. What incredible power had induced all three groups to work together?

“Always,” Falon said with a small forced laugh.