



"THE PERFECT ENDING."

—Claudia Gray, *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Evernight* series

DESTINED

APRILYNNE PIKE

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE *WINGS* SERIES

DESTINED

APRILYNNE PIKE

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Dedication

*To Neil Gleichman, who taught me the
importance of finishing strong.*

I hope I have.

Thanks, Coach.

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Chapter One

TAMANI PRESSED HIS FOREHEAD AGAINST THE chilly windowpane, fighting back a wave of exhaustion. Sleep wasn't an option, not while the only thing between him and an angry Winter faerie was a thin line of table salt.

Tonight, he was *Fear-gleidhidh* twice over.

The old word was one he normally wore with pride. It marked him as Laurel's guardian, her protector. But it had a richer meaning, one that went beyond the more traditional *Am Fear-faire*. *Fear-gleidhidh* meant "warden," and Tamani was charged with not only keeping Laurel safe but making certain she accomplished the mission Avalon had given her as a child.

Now he played prison warden too.

He looked over at his captive. Yuki's chair sat on the scuffed linoleum in the middle of a circle of white, granular salt. She slept, her cheek resting on her knees, hands cuffed loosely behind her. She looked uncomfortable. Beaten.

Harmless.

"I would have given up everything for you." Her words were hushed but clear.

Tamani felt Shar stiffen at the sound of her voice, breaking the thick silence.

Not sleeping after all. And she could never be harmless, he reminded himself. The small white flower blooming from the middle of her back, marking her a Winter faerie, was proof enough of that. It had been more than an hour since David cuffed her to the chair—an hour since Chelsea had exposed the irrefutable proof that she was, in fact, a Winter faerie—and Tamani still hadn't gotten used to the sight. It filled him with an icy fear he had rarely felt before.

"I was ready. That's why I stopped you before you brought me inside." Yuki looked up and unfolded her legs, stretching as best she could under the circumstances. "But you knew that, didn't you?"

Tamani held his tongue. He *had* known. And for a moment he'd been tempted to let her make her confession. But it wouldn't have ended well. Yuki would eventually have discovered that her affections were a sham, and then he would be at the mercy of a Winter faerie scorned. Better to cut the charade short.

He hoped he wasn't deceiving himself about that. She posed a threat; he shouldn't have felt any guilt about lying to her in the first place, much less now that he knew she'd been lying too. The power Winter faeries had over plants also made it possible for them to sense plant life at a distance, so from the instant Yuki had met Tamani, she had known him for a faerie. Known Laurel, too. The Winter had played them all.

So why did he still wonder whether he'd done the right thing?

"We could have been so good together, Tam," Yuki continued, her voice as silky as her rumpled silver dress, but with a malicious edge that made Tamani shiver. "Laurel's not going to leave him for you. She may be a faerie on the outside, but inside she's all human. David or no David, she belongs *here*, and you know it."

Avoiding his captain's eyes, Tamani turned back to the window and peered out into the darkness, pretending to look at . . . something. Anything. A sentry's life was full of viciousness, and Tamani and Shar had both seen each other take extreme measures to protect their homeland. But always against an obvious threat, a violent attacker: a *proven* foe. Trolls were their enemy—had always been. Winter faeries were the rulers of Avalon, and though Yuki had deceived them, she'd never actually *harmed* them. Somehow, putting her in chains felt worse than killing a hundred trolls.

"You and me, Tam, we're the same," Yuki continued. "We're being used by people who don't care what we want or what makes us happy. We don't belong with them; we belong together."

Reluctantly, Tamani glanced at her again. He was surprised to see that she wasn't looking at him as she spoke—she was staring past him, out the window, as if at some bright future she still imagined possible. Tamani knew better.

"There isn't a door in this world that can be closed to us, Tam. If you vouched for me, we could even go peacefully to Avalon. We could stay there together and live in the palace."

"How do you know about the palace?" Tamani asked reflexively, knowing even as he did that he was snapping at her bait. A barely audible sigh came from Shar, and Tamani wondered if it was directed at Yuki's stupidity or his own.

"Or we could stay here," she continued calmly, as though Tamani hadn't said anything. "Anywhere we wanted to go, anything we wanted to do, we could. Between your power over animals and mine over plants, the world would be ours. You know, the pairing of a Spring and Winter would work really well. Our talents complement each other perfectly."

Tamani wondered if she understood just how right she was—or how little it tempted him.

"I would have loved you forever," she whispered, bowing her head. Her dark, lustrous hair fell forward, veiling her face, and she sniffled quietly. Was she crying, or stifling a laugh?

Tamani started when a knock sounded at the door. Before he could take a step, Shar moved silently to the peephole.

Knife in his fist, Tamani tensed—ready. Was it Klea? That's what everything was for—the circle with Yuki in cuffs—an elaborate trap to snare the scheming Fall faerie who *might* be trying to kill them.

And might not.

If only they could know for sure.

Until they did, Tamani had to assume they were a threat—a lethal one.

But with a shimmer of a grimace, Shar pulled the door open and Laurel entered the room, Chelsea close behind.

"Laurel" was all Tamani managed to say, his fingers falling from the knife. Even after loving Laurel for as long as he could remember, and lately becoming something . . . something *more*, he still felt that leap of joy every time he saw her.

She had changed out of her dark-blue formal—the one she'd worn when he'd held her in his arms over a year ago at the Samhain festival, when he'd kissed her so passionately. It seemed far away.

Laurel wasn't looking at him now; she only had eyes for Yuki.

"You shouldn't be here," Tamani whispered.

Laurel arched one eyebrow in response. "I wanted to see for myself."

Tamani clenched his teeth. In truth, he *did* want her there, but his own selfish desires were at odds with his concern for her safety. Would he *ever* be able to satisfy both?

"I thought you were going after David," Tamani said to Chelsea, who was still in her deep-red formal. She'd ditched her heels somewhere, so the bottom of the dress pooled at her feet like blood.

"I couldn't find him," Chelsea said, her lip quivering almost imperceptibly. She looked at Laurel

who was still studying their silent prisoner.

“Yuki?” Laurel said tentatively. “Are you okay?”

Yuki looked up, glaring at Laurel with steel and fury. “Do I look okay to you? I’ve been abducted. I’m handcuffed to a metal chair! How would *you* be?”

The Winter faerie’s venomous tone seemed to hit Laurel like a breaking wave and she took a step backward. “I came to check on you.” Laurel glanced at Tamani, but Tamani wasn’t sure what she wanted. Encouragement? Permission? He offered her a pained grimace and a tiny, helpless shrug.

Laurel turned back to Yuki, the Winter faerie’s expression unreadable, her chin held high. “What does Klea want from me?” Laurel asked.

Tamani didn’t expect her to answer, but Yuki met Laurel’s gaze and simply said, “Nothing.”

“Then why did you come?”

Yuki smiled now, a crooked, mischievous smile. “I didn’t say she *never* wanted anything. But she doesn’t need you anymore.”

Laurel’s eyes darted to Tamani, then to Shar, before returning to Yuki.

“Laurel, listen,” Yuki said, her voice quiet, comforting. “This whole charade is completely unnecessary. I’ll talk to you if you just get me out of here.”

“That’s enough,” Tamani said.

“Step in here and shut me up,” Yuki said, glaring at Tamani before turning back to Laurel. “I’ve never done anything to hurt you and you *know* I could have. I could have killed you a million times but I didn’t. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

Tamani opened his mouth, but Laurel laid a hand on his chest, silencing him. “You’re right. But you’re a Winter faerie. You hid that, even though you had to know about us. Why?”

“Why do you think? The moment your soldier friends found out what I was, they cut off my power and chained me to a chair!”

Tamani hated that she was right.

“Okay, well, maybe we just need to start over,” Laurel said. “If we can figure this out before Klea shows up, even better. If you could just tell us—”

“Tamani has the keys,” Yuki said, looking over at him, malice gleaming in her eyes. “Let me out of here, and I’ll tell you *whatever* you want to know.”

“No deal,” Tamani said, doing his best to sound bored.

Laurel spoke to Yuki again, cutting them off. “It’s probably safest for everyone if—”

“No!” Yuki shouted. “I can’t believe you’re even a part of this! After what they did to you? To your parents?”

Tamani frowned; what did Laurel’s parents have to do with anything?

But Laurel was already shaking her head. “Yuki, I don’t like that they made me forget. But I can’t change the past—”

“Forget? I’m not talking about memory elixirs. What about the *poison*?”

“Oh, come on—” Tamani blurted.

Laurel shushed him. “Yuki, do you know who poisoned my father?”

Tamani was pretty certain of the answer, and he knew Laurel was too—it had to have been Klea. But if Laurel could convince Yuki to confirm their suspicions . . .

“Your father?” Yuki looked confused. “Why would they poison your father? I’m talking about your *mother*.”

Again Laurel looked at Tamani, and he shook his head with a tiny shrug. What was Yuki playing at?

“You don’t even know, do you? Big coincidence that the couple who *happened* to own the land

around the gate just *happened* to be childless—waiting for a little blond baby to pop into their lives. How . . . convenient. Wouldn't you say?"

"That's enough," Tamani said sharply. He should have guessed—more games. Yuki was just looking for ways to get them doubting themselves—and each other.

"They did that," Yuki said. "Fifteen years before you even showed up on their doorstep, the faeries made sure your mother was baby-hungry enough to take you without question. They damaged her. They ruined Laurel. Made sure she could never have her own children. They ruined her life and you're siding with them."

"Don't listen to her, Laurel. It's not true," Tamani said. "She's just trying to get into your head."

"Am I? Why don't we ask *him*?"

Chapter Two

LAUREL FOLLOWED YUKI'S EYES TO SHAR, WHO stood as still as a statue, his face betraying nothing.

It couldn't be true. It *couldn't*. Not Shar, who had been her unseen guardian since she first left Avalon.

So why isn't he denying it?

"Tell her," Yuki said, straining against her chair. "Tell her what *you* did to her *mother*."

Shar's mouth stayed closed.

"Shar," Laurel begged quietly. She wanted to hear him say it wasn't true. *Needed* him to say it. "Please."

"It was necessary," Shar replied at last. "We didn't choose them. They just lived there. The plan had to work, Laurel. We had no choice."

"There's always a choice," Laurel whispered, her mouth suddenly dry, her chin quivering with anger. Shar had poisoned her mother. Shar, who had been watching over her even longer than Tamani, had *poisoned her mother*.

"I have a home and family to protect. And I will do whatever it takes to keep Avalon safe."

Laurel bristled. "You didn't have to—"

"Yes, I did," Shar said. "I have to do a lot of things I don't want to do, Laurel. Do you think I wanted to sabotage your human parents? Wanted to make *you* forget? I do as I'm told. It's why I watched you every day, before Tamani came along. Why I know everything there is to know about you. The heirloom bowl you broke and lied about. The dog you buried outside your window, because you couldn't bear to have him farther away. The time you spent with Tamani, out at the cabin in October."

"Shar," Tamani said, his voice a clear warning.

"I gave you what space I could," Shar said quietly, his voice at last holding a hint of remorse. But the tiny apology was clearly extended to Tamani, not to Laurel; the sudden urge to stride across the room and slap Shar across the face was stifled only by her paralyzing rage.

Yuki's smile faded. "This is the force you've allied with, Laurel? I may not have always been truthful with you, but even I thought you were better than these monsters." She looked down at the salt encircling her chair. "A little swish of your foot and I can put a stop to this. I'll take you with me and show you how wrong Avalon is. And you can help me make it right."

Laurel stared at the salt. Part of her wanted to do it, just to lash out at Shar. "How do you know about Avalon?"

"Does it matter?" Yuki asked, her face unreadable.

"Maybe."

"Set me free. I'll give you the answers they've been keeping from you."

"Don't do it, Laurel," Tamani said softly. "I don't like it either, but letting her go doesn't make anything better."

"Do you think I don't know that?" Laurel snapped, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the

white circle at her feet.

Tamani drew back, silent.

Laurel wanted to kick the circle—she *did*. It was an irrational urge, one she knew she'd never act on, but hot tears pooled in her eyes as the desire burned in her throat.

“Laurel.” A soft hand touched her arm, pulling her back to reality. She turned to a white-faced Chelsea. “Come with me. We’ll talk it over, take a drive, whatever you need to cool down.”

Laurel stared at her friend, focusing on the one person in the room who had never hurt her, never wronged her. She nodded, not looking at anyone else. “Let’s go,” she said. “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Once they were outside, Chelsea closed the door then stopped. “Damn it,” she cursed softly. “I put my keys down somewhere. Stupid dress with no pockets,” she muttered, gathering the hem so she wouldn’t trip on it. “I’ll be right back.”

She turned and the door opened before she could touch the knob.

“Keys,” Chelsea explained as she pushed past Tamani.

He pulled the door shut, leaving the two of them alone on the porch. She fixed her gaze on the stairwell, suddenly unwilling to look at him.

But then, he wasn’t meeting her eyes, either.

“I didn’t know,” Tamani whispered after a long pause. “I promise.”

“I know,” Laurel whispered. She put her back against the wall and slid down to the ground, hugging her knees. Her voice was flat even to her own ears. “My mom was an only child. Her dad left when she was a baby. It was just her and her mom. And then Grandma died too. Mom always wanted a big family. Five kids, she told me one day. She wanted five kids. But it never happened.”

She didn’t know why she was telling him this, but talking made her feel better somehow, so she kept going.

“They went to a ton of doctors and no one could figure out what was wrong. None of them. That basically cemented her mistrust of doctors. It also wiped out their savings for a long time. And that doesn’t even matter, because Mom would have kept me even if she had other kids,” Laurel said firmly. “I know she would have. Shar didn’t have to do it at all.”

She was silent for a while. “You know what *really* makes me mad?”

Tamani had the grace to shake his head silently.

“I have a secret now. I tell them everything. Everything. It hasn’t been easy, but being open and honest has been the most wonderful part of my life the past year or so. Now, I have this—this *thing* that I can’t tell them ever, because they would never look at me or faeries the same way.” Her anger flared, white hot. “And I hate him for that,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Tamani said. “I know how much they mean to you and . . . and I’m sorry they got hurt.”

“Thank you,” Laurel said.

Tamani looked down at his hands, an emotion sketched across his face that Laurel couldn’t quite decipher. “I resent that I didn’t know,” he finally said. “There’s so much I don’t know. And I don’t think Yuki is going to tell us anything. Half of what she says contradicts the other half. I thought maybe, once we had her trapped, we’d finally get the answers we’ve been looking for, but . . . something doesn’t happen soon . . . I’m not sure what Shar will do.”

“Shar . . .” What was it he’d told her? *I will do whatever it takes to keep Avalon safe*. “He won’t hurt her, will he? To get more information?”

“He can’t. Even if he were so inclined, he can’t enter the circle.”

“There are things he could do without entering the circle,” Laurel said. “He could—”

“I won’t let him,” Tamani countered firmly. “I promise. I’ll watch out for her. Lies or not, she was my friend. ~~Maybe she still is, I don’t know. Besides, even Shar wouldn’t risk the penalties he would face for . . . for torturing a Winter faerie.~~”

Laurel wasn’t sure she believed that.

“He’s not a monster,” Tamani continued. “He does what has to be done, but that doesn’t mean he likes it. I understand you can’t trust *him* right now, but please try to trust *me*.”

Laurel nodded glumly. Like she had a choice?

“Thank you,” he said.

“Can it really hold her, Tam? The circle?”

He was silent for a moment. “I think so.”

“It’s just salt,” Laurel said quietly. “You were with me in the Winter Palace; you felt the power in those upper rooms. Containing that kind of magic with something that’s currently sitting on my dining-room table doesn’t seem possible.”

“She walked into it of her own accord. Shar says that’s where the power comes from.” His eyelashes rose and his pale green eyes met hers. “Never underestimate the power of a situation you put yourself into.”

She knew he was talking about more than just the salt circle.

After a moment of hesitation Tamani joined her on the ground, settling a comforting arm over her shoulders.

“I’m sorry for everything,” he whispered, words weighted with regret. She turned her face and leaned in, wanting to lose herself in him, to forget everything else, just for a moment. Tamani exhaled shakily and brought his face close to hers. Laurel lifted her hand to his cheek and drew him forward the rest of the way. Their lips had scarcely touched when the door opened and Chelsea stormed out, keys jangling in her hand.

“Shar had them the whole time,” she complained loudly. “He stood there and watched me look over for them and then—” Her eyes zeroed in on Tamani’s arm around Laurel’s shoulders. “Oh, duh.” Chelsea said, clearly realizing Shar’s intent now. Then, softly, she added, “Sorry.”

Laurel rolled down her window, letting the wind caress her face as Chelsea drove through the empty, darkened streets. For nearly half an hour Chelsea said nothing further about their short bout in the apartment or her ill-timed appearance, and Laurel appreciated the effort her friend must have put in keeping quiet. Silence certainly did not come naturally to Chelsea. She was probably dying to rehash their visit with Yuki, but all Laurel wanted to do was force it to the back of her mind and pretend it had never happened.

“Hey, is that . . .”

Chelsea was already pulling over when Laurel realized that the tall guy walking down the side of the road, silhouetted by the streetlight, was David. His eyes were wary as the headlights flashed across them, but recognition—and relief—dawned as Chelsea pulled her mother’s car alongside him.

“Where were you?” Chelsea demanded when David crouched to peer through the passenger window. “I drove all over the place.”

David studied the ground. “I stayed out of sight,” he admitted. “I didn’t want to be found.”

Chelsea glanced over her shoulder in the direction he had been walking. Toward the apartment. “Where are you going?”

“Back,” David growled. “To make things right.”

“She’s doing okay,” Chelsea said, her eyes serious.

“But I put her in there.”

“She’s figured the circle out,” Chelsea insisted. “It’s not like it was. She’s not hurting herself anymore. She just sits there. Well, sits and talks,” she added.

But David was shaking his head. “I’ve been running away from my part in this and I’m done. I’m going back to make sure everything stays humane. Or, you know, whatever the plant equivalent is.”

“Tamani said he would make sure she was safe,” Laurel said.

“But his—and Shar’s—definition of *safe* may not quite match up with mine. Ours.” He looked between them. “We put her there. All of us. And I still think it was the right decision, but if it wasn’t . . . I don’t want to stand by and let it get worse.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Laurel asked, not willing to admit that she didn’t want to go back either.

“Maybe we can take shifts. One of us, one of them,” David said.

Chelsea rolled her eyes.

“Someone would have to stay all night,” Laurel said. “Which my parents would probably let me do but—”

“Staying up all night isn’t really your thing,” David said, voicing Laurel’s concern.

“I can text my mom,” Chelsea offered. “I told her I’d probably spend the night at your house anyway—makes total sense after a big dance. And she never checks up on me.”

Laurel and Chelsea both turned to look at David. “I’ll think of something,” he mumbled. “What about Ryan?”

“What about him?” Chelsea asked, finding something interesting to examine on the steering wheel.

“He’s going to wonder why you keep running off at strange hours. You can’t always use Laurel as an excuse.”

“I don’t think he’ll notice,” Chelsea said.

“You can’t just assume that,” David retorted. “Don’t underestimate him. You *always* underestimate him.”

“I do not!”

“Well, he’s going to notice *something* if you suddenly start being ‘busy’ all the time. And he’s going to want to spend time with you over the break. Especially after you ditched him almost every day last week to study for finals,” David said.

“Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to happen,” Chelsea said ruefully, leaning back against her seat and meeting his eyes at last.

David just shook his head. “I don’t understand you. You were so worried about him when Yuki or Klea or whoever slipped him that memory elixir and now it’s like you don’t care at all.” He kicked the dirt at his feet. “Why don’t you just break up with him?”

“I did,” Chelsea said quietly.

David’s eyes darted from Chelsea to Laurel and back again. “You *what*?”

“How else was I supposed to justify running off in the middle of the dance . . . with you,” she added in a mumble.

“I was kidding!”

“I wasn’t. I was going to do it anyway.”

David looked to Laurel. “Did you know about this?”

Laurel glanced at Chelsea before nodding.

“Why?” David asked. “What went wrong?”

Chelsea opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

“It was just time,” Laurel said, coming to the rescue. This wasn’t something *anyone* needed to ta
about yet. Certainly not right now.

David shrugged, his face a mask of nonchalance. “Whatever. We’ve got to get back there. It’s goin
to be a long night.”

Chapter Three

“SO YOU JUST SIT HERE?” CHELSEA ASKED TAMANI, her voice cracking a bit as she tried to hide a yawn.

The apartment was dark and quiet. Shar had taken the opportunity to lean his head against the wall and was getting a little much-needed sleep. That left Tamani chatting quietly with Chelsea, who had insisted on taking the first shift.

“Pretty much,” Tamani replied. “You can get some sleep if you want to; the carpet is soft. Sorry the furniture is so . . .”

“Nonexistent?” Chelsea offered, straightening up in the simple wooden chair that normally sat unused, at the kitchen table. “It’s okay, I’m really not that tired. Just kinda bored.” She paused before leaning close to Tamani. “Doesn’t she ever talk?”

“Yes, I *talk*,” Yuki hissed before Tamani could respond. “It’s not like you haven’t heard me talk a million times before. Remember back in the day, when we went to school together? I know *last week* must seem like ancient history now, but I thought you humans could at least remember back that far.”

Chelsea was still with her mouth agape before snapping it shut and muttering, “Well, sooor-ry!”

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” Yuki said, fidgeting in her seat. “I’m stuck here for a couple days at worst. You’re stuck for the rest of your life.”

“What do you mean?” Chelsea asked, turning more fully toward Yuki.

“Don’t listen to her,” Tamani warned. “She just likes to get under your skin.”

“Chelsea Harrison,” Yuki continued, ignoring Tamani. “The perpetual third wheel. Always so close to what you desperately want, but never quite there.”

“Really,” Tamani said, shifting to place himself between Chelsea and Yuki. “She has nothing to say that you want to hear.” He couldn’t help but feel protective. The human girl had wormed her way into his good graces the last few months and he didn’t want her to be hurt by whatever was going to come out of Yuki’s mouth next.

“You really think you can compete?”

But Chelsea’s curiosity was almost as infamous as her honesty and she leaned forward so she could see Yuki again. “Compete with *who*?”

“Laurel, of course. Fact of the matter is, she doesn’t have to choose David—which she will,” Yuki added, doubtless for Tamani’s benefit. “But even if she doesn’t, you still lose. Let’s say everything happens like you dream. Laurel leaves David behind, and one day he turns around and realizes, for the first time ever, that you’ve been standing there the whole time, just waiting to be noticed.”

Chelsea’s face flushed red, but her eyes never left Yuki’s.

“Suddenly you’re everything he never knew he always wanted. He adores you and—unlike your flaky boyfriend—is willing to go to college anywhere you want.”

“Who told y—”

“You go to Harvard, you move in together, maybe you even get married. But,” she said, leaning forward as far as she could, “Laurel will always be there in the back of his mind. All the adventures

they had, the plans they made. She's prettier than you, more magical than you, just plain *better* than you. Face it, you have no hope of ever being *anything* but a rebound. And you'll have to live your life knowing that if it had been up to David, he would never have even gotten a chance to be with you. Laurel wins."

Chelsea's breathing was ragged. She stood, avoiding Tamani's eyes. "I . . . I think I need some water."

Tamani watched her disappear into the kitchen, just out of sight. He heard the tap start to run—and run. And run some more, much longer than necessary to fill a cup. After a full minute he stood and shot a glare at Yuki, who looked smug.

Shar lifted his head at the sound of Tamani's footsteps. But Tamani waved a *Be right back* sign at him.

Keeping Yuki in the corner of his eye, Tamani followed Chelsea to the kitchen, where she stood facing away from him, arms braced on the sink. There was no cup in sight.

"You all right?" Tamani asked quietly, his voice just louder than the hiss of the faucet.

Chelsea's head jerked up. "Yeah, I . . ." She gestured aimlessly. "I couldn't find a glass."

Tamani opened a cupboard right in front of her and retrieved one, handing it to her wordlessly. She filled it under the flowing water and started to reach for the tap to turn it off, but Tamani stopped her. "Leave it on. Less likely she can hear us."

Chelsea looked down at the running water—probably fighting the urge to not waste it—then nodded and withdrew her hand. Tamani stepped a little closer, half an eye still on Yuki's blossom, barely visible around the corner.

"She's wrong," he said simply. "She makes everything she says sound true, but it's twisted until it's not really truth at all."

"No, it's absolutely true," Chelsea said with surprising confidence. "Laurel is so much more than I will ever be. I hadn't thought about how her effect on David could linger like that. But it will. Yuki's right."

"You can't think that way. Laurel is very different from you, but you, you're amazing all by yourself," Tamani said, surprising himself by how much he meant it. He hesitated, then grinned. "You're funnier than Laurel."

"Oh, good," Chelsea said dryly. "I'm sure a couple of well-timed jokes'll win David's heart over me forever."

"That's not what I mean," Tamani said. "Listen, seriously, you can't compare yourself to a faerie. We're plants. Our perfect symmetry is something you humans value for some reason. So on the outside, yeah, she's going to look different from you. But that doesn't make her better, and honestly, except for maybe in the beginning, I don't think that's what David saw in her."

"So she's better on the inside, too?" Chelsea muttered.

Now she's being deliberately knot-headed. "No, listen, I just want you to understand what makes Yuki so wrong. In Avalon, everyone has the same kind of symmetry Laurel and I have. We do have a range of . . . beauty, I guess, but there's nothing special about Laurel's appearance. She even has a friend at the Academy who is practically her mirror image. If David somehow met Katya, or some faerie more beautiful than her, do you think he'd stop loving Laurel?"

"I gotta say, you're really bad at this," Chelsea grumbled.

"Sorry." Tamani grimaced. "I didn't mean to imply that he would never stop—"

Chelsea interrupted him with a small, pitiable sound. "It's okay, I know what you're trying to say. Really, the last thing you need to be doing is trying to convince people that Laurel's nothing special."

don't believe it; you don't believe it. And considering the fact that you stealing her away is my only hope for any chance with David in the future, I hope you never do."

"No, that's not it at all." He paused, thinking. "Laurel was gone for a long time, Chelsea. And even though she always had my love, I've looked at other girls in the past." He couldn't help but feel a little silly, making the confession. "There was one really beautiful faerie who I . . . danced with a couple of times, at festivals. I haven't seen her in years, but I have to tell you, since being able to really be with Laurel—to get to know her all over again—I haven't thought of that faerie once. Seriously," he added with a grin when Chelsea raised her eyebrows. "I barely remembered her enough to bring her up. I love Laurel, so she *becomes* the most beautiful faerie in the world to me, and no one else can compare."

"Yes, I think we've established that Laurel is awesome," Chelsea drawled. "I think so too. That's the kind of the problem."

"No, I . . . Forget Laurel for a minute. Just listen to what I'm *saying*. I don't know if David will ever love you. But if he does, if he *really* does, it won't matter how pretty or exciting someone else might be. If he really loves you, you can't possibly lose. Because he won't see anyone as even remotely comparable to you."

Chelsea looked up at him with her big gray eyes—eyes that begged for his words to be true. "Would you forget about Laurel, if you fell in love with me?"

Tamani sighed. "Sure, if it were possible for me to love anyone but her. I don't think it is, though."

"How does she resist you?" Chelsea asked, but her smile was back.

Tamani shrugged. "I wish I knew. How does David resist *you*?"

She laughed, for real this time, dissipating the tension that had filled the small kitchen.

"I wish you success with him," Tamani said, serious now.

"How altruistic of you," Chelsea replied, rolling her eyes.

"No, really," Tamani said, laying a hand on her arm and leaving it there until she looked up at him.

"My own hopes aside, I know what it feels like to pine for someone. I know the pain it can bring." He paused before whispering, "I wish us both success." As they walked out of the kitchen together, he offered her a grin. "And the fact that the one depends on the other, well, chalk it up to a happy accident."

Chapter Four

THOUGH LAUREL'S EYES WERE OPEN WHEN HER alarm rang, its shrill buzz still made her jump as it cut through the early morning half light. December 22. Normally this was a day she would spend helping her parents in their stores, or putting up last-minute decorations, listening to Christmas music, maybe making some holiday treats. She suspected this year wouldn't be nearly so festive.

The sky was still murky as Laurel opened her closet and reached for one of her faerie-made shirts—it seemed fitting today, when she was truly fulfilling her role as an agent of Avalon. As she slipped the pink peasant top over her head, it felt more like armor than simple, gauzy fabric.

Just outside the front door, Laurel was met by a green-clothed sentry she didn't recognize—they were just so many of them now!—looking very much like he wanted to stop her. “Sun's coming up,” Laurel said, without waiting to hear what he had to say. “And I'm going to Tamani's. You can check up on me in about five minutes. Now move.”

To her surprise, he did.

She glanced at the house as she was backing down the driveway, eyes lighting on her parents' darkened window. She still hadn't told them what was going on, but that couldn't last much longer. “It's almost over,” she said, hoping she was right.

After a short drive Laurel knocked on the apartment door and waited for someone to let her in, bracing herself for the possibility of Shar answering. Not that it mattered; Shar was here somewhere and she would have to face him eventually. But later was better than now and Laurel was relieved when Tamani's face appeared behind the door.

“Everything go okay?” Laurel asked as she ducked in, keeping her voice low.

“If by *okay* you mean *uneventful*, then yes,” Tamani replied, looking down at her with a warmth in his eyes that she hadn't seen since they captured Yuki. She wondered what Tamani and Chelsea had talked about and if there was any way to request they talk about it more often.

“I guess that's *okay*,” Laurel replied, dropping her backpack on the floor. But she knew they were hoping something *would* happen. It had now been almost eight hours since they'd first captured Yuki. It felt too long—and Klea did not have a reputation for tardiness.

Chelsea was sitting in a chair near Tamani, looking tired—still in her ruffled dress—but sporting a smile. Tamani had lost his bowtie, shoes, and jacket—though because of Yuki, not his gloves—and his shirt was unbuttoned halfway down his chest. The two of them looked like they had been at an all-night party rather than sentry duty.

The sound of running water reached her ears and Laurel realized Shar must be taking a shower. Six months ago such mundane, human-like behavior from the captain might have made her smile. Instead every moment she spent eyeing the door to Tamani's room ratcheted up the tension in her neck and shoulders. How could she face him again, knowing what he had done to her mother?

“I'll stay with you when he comes out,” Tamani said, his breath tickling her ear. She hadn't even noticed he'd stepped so close.

Laurel shook her head. “You need sleep too.”

“I dozed here and there. Trust me,” he said, his fingers soft on her shoulders, “I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Laurel whispered, feeling inordinately better that he would be with her.

They both turned as Shar emerged from the bedroom, his hair still damp. He paused when he saw Laurel but met her gaze evenly before she lost her nerve and looked down at the floor.

“Anything happen in the past five minutes?” Shar asked, placing his hands on his hips as he stepped into the front room of the apartment.

“Not a thing,” Tamani said, mirroring Shar’s posture. Laurel suppressed a smile at how reflexively—and likely unconsciously—Tamani emulated his mentor.

Shar turned and looked at Yuki with a strangely neutral expression. Laurel wasn’t sure how to react to him at all. At times he seemed practically emotionless. She knew there was more to him than that—Tamani had told her stories, stories that made the both of them laugh to tears. But the faerie now observing his prisoner—so focused, so unaffected—made her question how anyone could get close to him.

“How much longer do we wait?” Tamani asked. “I’m starting to wonder if we were right the first time; that Yuki is nothing more than a distraction and Klea is letting her sit while she does . . . whatever it is she’s planning to do.”

“Unless Klea’s plans threaten the gate, or Laurel, they are of no concern to us. We have Laurel under constant guard, and to truly threaten the gate, Klea needs *her*,” Shar said, pointing—almost accusingly—at Yuki. “So until she comes to retrieve Yuki, we can assume the gate is safe. As safe as it ever is,” he amended. “Our place is here, doing just what we’re doing now.”

“Do you think we should tell Jamison?” Laurel asked.

“No,” Tamani and Shar said in unison.

Yuki looked up at them with a strange, focused expression.

“Why?” Laurel insisted. “It seems like he, of all fae, should know.”

“Come with me,” Shar said, turning back toward the apartment’s lone bedroom. “Watch the Bend for a few minutes, please, Tam.”

Laurel’s throat tightened. She felt the soft fabric of Tamani’s glove as his hand slipped into hers.

“I’ll come stand in the doorway if it’ll make you feel better,” he whispered.

But Laurel shook her head, swallowing her anger as best she could. “I’m okay,” she said, willing it to be true. “He’s still the same Shar he’s always been, right?”

Tamani nodded and squeezed her hand before letting it slide from his fingers.

“I’m going to go,” Chelsea said wearily, before Laurel could follow Shar.

“Thanks,” Laurel said, hugging her friend. “The house is unlocked.” One bonus of having so many sentries surrounding her house was that Laurel never bothered to lock her doors anymore. “Try not to wake my parents. Trust me; you don’t want to have to explain all this to them.” She swallowed. The inevitable explanation would be *her* task, soon enough.

Chelsea nodded, stifled a yawn, and headed out the front door; Tamani bolted and chained it behind her.

Laurel walked into Tamani’s bedroom, not bothering to flip on the light. The sun was halfway over the horizon now, casting a purplish glow through the curtainless window. It illuminated a sparse room where a single wooden chair draped with various articles of clothing sat beside a double bed with a mussed blanket on it. Laurel stared; it was Tamani’s bed. It was strange to think that this was the first time she had seen it. The first time she had been in his room at all.

“Please close the door.”

Laurel did, meeting Tamani's eyes for an instant before the door shut between them.

"We can't tell the other sentries what we've learned about Yuki, and we *cannot* go to Jamison," Shar said. He stood with his face close to hers, his arms crossed over his chest and his voice barely loud enough for her to hear. "For several reasons, but the main one is that we can't risk going anywhere near the gate. The only thing standing between Yuki and Avalon is that she does not know its exact location. As soon as she does, everything is over."

"But Klea worked with Barnes. She *must* have. She's got to know where the land is already."

"Doesn't matter," Shar said brusquely. "Short of cutting down that entire forest, the only hope Shar and Yuki have of accessing the gate is if they know its *precise* location and how it's disguised."

"But we could send someone. Aaron, or Silve, or—"

"And if they're followed? That could be the reason Klea has waited this long to rescue her protégé. She could be waiting for us to go for help."

"And what if she never shows up?" Laurel snapped. "We can't keep Yuki chained to that chair forever, Shar!"

Shar drew back.

"Sorry," Laurel muttered. She hadn't meant to speak so sharply.

"No, it's fine," Shar said, sounding bemused. "You're right. But it may not matter. As far as I'm concerned, the only way this ends well is if we keep Yuki as far from the gate as possible."

"So we just sit around?"

"We've come to a fork in the branch. Right now, all we have is one Winter faerie and a lot of strong suspicions. Say we go to Avalon. Assuming Klea doesn't know where the gate is, we might lead her to it. If she does know, she may have set traps along our path. Either way, we stand to lose a lot more than we stand to gain. And even if we make it to Avalon safely, what then? How will you feel if Queen Marion orders us to execute Yuki?"

Laurel swallowed.

"Believe it or not, that's probably the *best* we could hope for," Shar said grimly. "Our other choice is to wait here," he continued. "The circle will hold as long as it's unbroken, but make no mistake, it is a fragile thing. One misstep and Yuki is unleashed on us all. The only way to guarantee our safety is to put a knife in Yuki right now."

"What? No!" Laurel couldn't keep the panic from her voice.

"You're starting to see the problem," Shar said, his voice just a touch softer. "Yuki is clearly dangerous, but I don't think she's done anything worthy of death. Not yet, anyway. But no matter what we do, at some point it will almost certainly come down to us, or her. The only hope I have is that Klea does need Yuki, and that she will come to rescue her. And if we can just last long enough—if we can find some way to neutralize Klea *here*—"

"Then we confirm our suspicions, the gate stays safe, and nobody has to die," Laurel finished in a near monotone. She didn't like it, but she didn't have any better ideas. They were only three faeries and two humans trying to stand against Klea and whatever forces she had at her disposal. What would they face? A dozen trolls? A hundred? More faeries?

"Do you understand now?"

Laurel nodded, half wishing she didn't. She had to grudgingly admit that Shar's plan was, in all likelihood, the best one. For now. Without a word, she turned and left the room, Shar close behind.

"So . . . how does this work?" she asked, surveying the apartment and trying her best not to look directly at Yuki.

"We just sit. Or stand. Whatever you want," Tamani said. "Shar and I watch the door and the

windows. I try to ask her questions, but that generally goes nowhere.” He shrugged, the gesture seeming to be directed at Shar more than Laurel. “It’s pretty boring, to tell the truth.”

Yuki snorted, but none of them acknowledged her.

An electronic *ding!* sounded from Tamani’s bedroom, followed by a murmured exclamation from Shar.

“Beastly, frost-blighted—”

Laurel smirked; Shar detested cell phones, and every time one went off, he swore at it. Quietly and creatively, most of the time. His dark mutterings were swallowed by the bedroom as he went to retrieve his “human trinket” from where he had almost certainly accidentally-misplaced-it-on-purpose.

A knock sounded at the door and Tamani sprang to his feet. “Chelsea probably forgot her keys again.”

Shar stepped out of the bedroom carrying his phone. “It says Silve’s name. What does ‘text two’ mean?”

Tamani pressed his eye to the peephole.

“It means you have two messages—” Laurel began.

But Shar’s wide eyes were fixed on the back window of the apartment. “Don’t!” he shouted, turning back to Tamani.

With a crack of gunfire, the door exploded.

Chapter Five

THE BLAST THREW TAMANI TO THE FLOOR AND shattered the security chain with a metallic zing. As Laurel spun from the stinging spray of debris, she saw the back of the apartment burst apart. Window glass and drywall skittered across the floor as the most massive troll Laurel had ever seen came crashing through—a lower troll, like the one she'd seen chained in Barnes's hideout. The misshapen, paucity monstrosity thrashed about in an attempt to dislodge Aaron, who clung to the knives he'd embedded in its shoulders. The struggling pair rolled further into the kitchen, disappearing from sight.

As she turned back to Tamani, Laurel was horrified to see a bouquet of roses arcing through the air from the front door, shedding crimson petals like drops of blood as it floated almost leisurely toward Yuki's prison. The instant stretched to eternity as Laurel realized that in about half a second the roses were going to breach the salt circle, Yuki was going to be free, and if Shar was to be believed, there was a good chance she would kill them all.

A diamond-bladed knife cut through the air, pinning the paper-wrapped bouquet to the wall not an arm's length from the salt barrier that was keeping them all alive. Shar was already pulling another blade from a sheath at his waist as Yuki screamed in frustration and Laurel turned to the wrecked front door and the figure framed in it.

"Callista!" Shar exclaimed as Klea raised her face into the light.

A shadow of recognition passed over Klea's face and she looked at Shar, though her guns were pointed squarely at Tamani and Laurel. "Captain! Serendipitous."

"I watched you die fifty years ago," Shar said, disbelief heavy in his words. And then, "You're Klea."

"Shar!" Aaron stumbled in from the kitchen, flecked with debris and covered in troll blood. His left arm hung limp at his side. "There's more on the way; we tried to hold them back—"

Horror froze his features as his eyes lit on Yuki's ruffled blossom. "Goddess of Earth and Sky. Is that—that—?"

But the troll lunged at him from behind, and the two went crashing through another wall.

"I *told* you to cut that damn thing off," Klea snapped at Yuki. The gun in Klea's hand shook—almost certainly with anger rather than fear—but Laurel didn't dare move. "Now look what you've gotten yourself into."

Klea raised a defensive hand as Shar whipped another knife through the air. The blade knocked away one of her guns with a clang, but she turned the other at Shar and fired. Its sharp retort echoed in Laurel's ears and Shar staggered back, clutching his shoulder and slumping against the wall.

Seizing the moment, Tamani sprang at Klea, but she sidestepped his lunge and caught his wrist in her free hand, flipping him in the air and slamming him to the floor.

"Tam!" Shar's voice was strained as he struggled to stand.

But Tamani was already back on his feet, a long silver knife in his hand; Laurel hadn't even seen him draw it. Klea lunged at him with liquid speed, her movements so graceful they might have been

dance. She wove through Tamani's swipes untouched, then whipped the butt of her pistol across his face, leaving a ragged gash along his cheek. She landed another blow against his wrist and Tamani's knife seemed to leap into her hand as if of its own volition.

Tamani retreated two steps, evading most of Klea's jabs, but with nothing to parry her blows his shirt was soon a mess of ribbons, wet with sap from the shallow cuts accumulating on his arms and chest.

As Laurel looked for an opportunity to dive for Klea's dropped gun, something at the corner of her vision fluttered on ruby wings. With a sick twisting in her core she realized a petal had fallen from the skewered bouquet—drifting like a feather, its circuitous route was a ballet of twists and twirls in the breeze that wafted through the apartment. In moments it would enter the circle and then, under Yuki's power, the soft, innocent bit of flower would become a deadly weapon.

And Laurel was too far away—she'd never reach it in time.

"Shar!" she called, but he was between Klea and Tamani, wielding a chair as an improvised shield.

"Get her out of here!" Shar shouted, a kick from Klea twisting the chair from his grip. "Now!"

The world spun before Laurel's eyes as Tamani's arm clenched around her waist—rolling her straight to the destroyed wall—and then they were falling. A scream escaped her lips but was cut off as they hit the ground and the air was pushed out of her chest. They tumbled together along the ground and when they came to a stop, for a moment it was all Laurel could do to look up breathlessly at the hole Aaron's troll had made in the wall, ten feet above them.

"Come on," Tamani said, pulling Laurel to her feet before her head had completely stopped spinning. She followed him almost blindly, her hand tight in his as he wound around the back of the apartment building.

They paused when the squeal of splintering wood filled the air, accompanied by a sudden rush of wind. "Circle's broken," Tamani growled. The sound continued as they rounded the corner of the building, where Tamani immediately back-stepped, flattening Laurel against the wall. "It's crawling with trolls out front," he whispered, his mouth so close to her ear his lips brushed her skin. "We can't get to my car; we're going to have to run. You ready?"

Laurel nodded, the sound of snarling trolls reaching her ears over the deafening storm of splintering wood. Tamani gripped her hand tighter and pulled her along with him. She tried to look back, but Tamani stopped her with a finger on her chin and pointed her gaze forward again. "Don't," he said softly, sprinting across the open ground, slowing only slightly once they reached the relative safety of the trees.

"Will Shar be all right?" Laurel asked, her voice shaking as they ran through woods. Tamani was limping ungracefully, helping her along with one hand, the other clutched at his side.

"He'll handle Klea," said Tamani. "We need to get *you* to safety."

"Why did he call her Callista?" Laurel asked through heaving breaths. Nothing that had happened in the last few minutes made any sense to her.

"That's the name he knew her by," Tamani answered. "Callista's practically a legend among sentries. She was an Academy-trained Mixer. Exiled before you even sprouted. She was supposed to have died in a fire. On Shar's watch, back in Japan."

"But she faked it?"

"Apparently. Must have done a good job, too. Shar was thorough."

"What was she exiled for?" Laurel gasped.

Tamani's words were shaky as he picked his way through the trees and Laurel struggled to catch up to them. "Shar once told me she experimented with unnatural magic, faerie poisons . . . botanic

weapons, basically.”

Hadn't Katya told her, two summers ago, about a faerie who had taken things too far? It must be he—Laurel's stomach knotted at the thought of an Academy-trained Mixer who created poisons so evil she'd been exiled for it. Klea was scary enough *without* magic.

They ran silently for a few minutes, finally finding the faint path Laurel knew Tamani must have taken a hundred times over the last few months.

“Are you sure he'll be okay?” Laurel asked.

Tamani hesitated. “Shar is . . . a master Enticer. Like the Pied Piper I told you about a few weeks ago. He can control humans from a distance, and his control is far greater than most Tickers. Way better than mine,” he added quietly. “He—he can use them. To help him fight her.”

“So he's going to . . . control them?” Laurel asked, not quite understanding.

“Let's just say that fighting Shar in a building full of humans is a very, very bad idea.”

Sacrifices, Laurel realized. *Human barriers to lie in Klea's path, or soldiers attacking against the will*. She swallowed and tried not to dwell on that, concentrating on not tripping as Tamani continued to run almost too fast for her to keep up.

Soon she started recognizing the trees—they were nearing the back of her house. As he ran into the yard Tamani let out a high-pitched, warbling whistle. Aaron's second-in-command, a tall, dark-skinned faerie named Silve, came bursting from the tree line.

“Tam, they're everywhere!”

“That's not the worst of it,” Tamani replied, gasping for air.

Laurel stopped, resting her hands on her knees and trying to catch her breath as Tamani explained the situation—with sputtering protests from Silve at the details Tamani and Shar had kept secret.

“There's no time for explanations,” Tamani said, cutting Silve off. “Shar needs backup and he needs it *now*.” The two sentries took only a few precious seconds to outline a plan for dividing forces, and Silve sprang into the tree shouting orders.

Tamani put a protective hand at Laurel's waist and guided her to the back door, his gaze returning to the trees the whole way.

Laurel's mom was in the kitchen, a light cotton robe tied loosely at her waist, concern in her eyes. “Laurel? Where have you been? And what . . . ?” She gestured wordlessly at Tamani's wet, torn shirt.

“Is Chelsea here?” Laurel asked, avoiding her mom's question. For the moment.

“I don't know. I thought you were in bed.” Her eyes flitted to Tamani and his pained expression made her face go white. “Trolls again?” she whispered.

“I'll go check for Chelsea,” Laurel said, pushing Tamani onto a barstool as gently as she could manage.

She hurried up the stairs and cracked open her bedroom door just wide enough to see Chelsea's unmistakable curly hair spilling across the pillow. She pulled the door shut and heaved a sigh, relief washing over her, melting her down onto the carpet.

She looked up at the sound of footsteps, but it was just her dad stumbling blearily down the hallway. “Laurel, what's the matter? Are you okay?”

The avalanche of events that had buried her life in less than twenty-four hours forced her to blink back tears. “No,” she whispered. “No, I'm not.”

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