

Chapter One

His royal highness, Prince Lysander of the Court of Spring, lord of foxes and bearer of the flower crown, was asleep in the washtub again.

For a moment, Colette allowed herself simply to look down at the man she served. He was, like all of the high fae, quite perfect. He looked gentler when he slept, his face open and guileless, without his usual smile tipping his angular features over the edge from beautiful into uncanny. His red-gold hair framed his face in a lovely tumble of waves even after a night of far too much revelry. His ears poked out from beneath, long and sharp like daggers, the tips tufted with the red-orange fur of a fox. He was turned onto his side in the marble tub, with his bushy, red fox tail curled around himself like a blanket.

One of his boots was missing and his gold-edged tunic was stained dark with spilled wine. The outfit likely cost more than a year of Colette's wages.

At that final thought, she overturned the jug of water she held directly above the sleeping prince.

Lysander sputtered awake. "What!" His amber eyes opened, blinked, shone green in the reflected light from the window. Slit pupils focused on her before going round. "Colette!"

She curtsied. "Good morning, your highness."

"*What*," he repeated, eyes narrowing, lip curling to reveal one sharp canine.

"Shall I call for a bath?" she asked.

For a moment, they stared at one another. Colette tilted her chin up and relished the ability to look down at a fae, for once. Both literally and figuratively, she rarely had the chance. She was short, she was a servant, and worst of all to the fae, she was human.

The prince broke eye contact first, and scrubbed a hand across his face. “Yes,” he muttered.

“Very well.”

She left him there, and rang the charmed bell atop the prince’s nightstand that would summon the requested help. She felt the clear chime of the bell shiver its way down into her own bones, calling her to servitude, and was grateful that helping the prince bathe was not among her duties.

And there were plenty of others eager to take up the call. It seemed to take mere moments for three blue-skinned low fae to appear at the door, bearing steaming wooden tubs of water on their slender hips. The servants went in to help the prince fill his bath, and there was an awful lot of chatter and giggling.

Colette glanced at her reflection in the prince’s mirror – so very plain and mortal, with her short brown hair and freckles, and the curves of her body winking out even beneath the rough brown dress that was practically a burlap sack. Among mortals, she would be considered pretty. But even in comparison to the low fae, she was forever lacking. To the high fae? Well. It was no wonder the prince had never so much as *looked* at her in such a way despite his rakish reputation.

Colette shook her head and tried not to be bothered – either by the blushing servants as they scurried back out of the prince’s chambers, or the sound of Lysander humming in his bath and all of the vivid imagery it called to her mind. There was plenty of work to be done in cleaning

up the prince's messes. The evidence of his late night was scattered throughout his room: his missing boot on its side near the door, a wine stain on the fine carpet, a bizarre amount of what appeared to be glittery feathers dusting the bed and floor. Colette sighed and went to work.

She had spent the majority of her life in servitude, and thus she fell into the rhythms of cleaning easily, her mind far away as her body went through the motions. She hummed to herself as she scrubbed the carpet on her hands and knees - some half-forgotten tune, perhaps from her childhood. She remembered only the barest glimpses of her early years in the mortal realm. Her strongest memory was of the night she was taken from her bed. She remembered waking to the strange, beautiful face of a fae woman. The woman had lifted her out of bed and replaced her with an eerily silent faerie babe. A changeling who had taken her life overnight.

And Colette was taken to the fae realm. She had been less of a daughter and more of a pet to Lady Aigneis, the noblewoman who took her. She didn't think Aigneis expected her to live long; the fae realm was full of peril for anyone, and most of all an unloved five-year-old mortal.

Luckily Aigneis's lavish parties meant there was often plenty of leftover food to steal, though more than once Colette had made herself sick accidentally eating enchanted fruit that made her taste colors or hallucinate beasts in the shadows. Most of the fae revelers had barely seemed to notice the skinny human child scurrying among them; she learned it was better to avoid the attention early on, lest they cast glamours on her for their amusement. They did so love to see how frightened she was of basic illusions, or how easy it was to bend her to their will with a simple charm.

"Colette?"

Judging from the prince's tone, this was not the first time he had said her name. She blinked, and realized she was on her knees in front of a thoroughly cleaned carpet. The rest of

the room was spotless as well. She had disappeared into her own mind again, as she often did while cleaning. She cleared her throat, climbed to her feet, and turned to the prince.

“Yes, your highness?” she asked, and raised her eyes to him.

Colette had been working at the castle for four years. At age sixteen, Lady Aigneis had tired of her and brought her to Castle Bloomhaven as a gift for the royal family. For two years, Colette had served as a cup-bearer - and then a chance meeting with Prince Lysander had led to him taking her on as a personal attendant. So for two years, she had seen him every day, and slowly fallen into a startlingly easy camaraderie with him.

Yet in moments like this, she was still taken aback by his beauty. In the bathtub, his looks had been softened by sleep and a hangover. But freshly bathed and dressed for the day in fine white linen embroidered with flowers, it was almost painful to look at him. His damp, tousled hair, those bright amber eyes, the sharp-toothed smile... it was easy to see why Prince Lysander was known even amongst the fae for his stunning looks. His ears perked and the tip of his tail twitched as he caught her scrutiny, and she hoped she was doing a good job of keeping her expression blank.

Thankfully, Colette had also spent enough time with Prince Lysander to see beyond his lovely face. So when he opened his pretty mouth to say, “I seem to have misplaced my boot,” she was not particularly surprised.

She pointed to the corner where she had placed the lost shoe.

“And my rings?” he asked, hopefully.

She pointed at the stack on the vanity, suppressing a comment about how he had left them scattered all over the room, as per usual.

He smiled big enough that she caught a glimpse of the sharp tips of his teeth. "Where would I be without you, dear Colette?"

"Likely still in the washtub."

He laughed like it was a joke; the sound was as bright and as striking as the ring of the bell that summoned her to service. She swallowed an abrupt lump in her throat and watched as the prince sat at the vanity and began placing his rings on his fingers, one by one. Gold and emeralds and pressed flowers in glass winked from each slender finger. On another it would have been gaudy, but excess suited Lysander well; it was hard to imagine him wearing anything else.

Colette stood behind him with her hands clasped, unable to look away from his face in the mirror. The reflection was slightly easier to stand than the full unfiltered sight of him, and he didn't seem to notice her attention as he fussed with his sleeves and his hair. When he struggled with an unruly red curl for an inordinate amount of time, she could not resist the urge to step forward and smooth it behind his ear herself. The prince barely reacted, but she felt a traitorous rush of heat to her face at the physical contact.

"Are you nervous about tonight?" she asked in an attempt to deflect from the odd moment, catching his eyes in the mirror.

"Why should I be?" he asked.

Her lips curled in a wry smile. "Why indeed? Only the peace of the realm is at stake." She reached for his crown before he could do so himself. It felt so light in her hands, those gold-wrought leaves and enchanted flowers that marked him as the prince of Spring. But when she placed it atop his head his eyes shut briefly as if he bore some terrible weight.

“The peace is made, this is just formality,” he said, his breezy tone at odds with the tense furrow of his brow. Colette resisted the urge to smooth the crease out with her thumb. He opened his eyes and looked at his reflection, admiring the crown from one angle and then another. “And it’s not as though I’m one of the poor fools they’ve married off to the unseelie courts.”

That was true, but it belied another truth. In an effort to solidify the end of the war between the seelie and unseelie fae, the four courts had arranged two marriages: Princess Niamh of the Winter Court would wed Prince Cyprian of Summer, and Prince Darragh of the Autumn Court would marry Princess Sirena of Spring. Which was to say, Lysander’s sister Sirena was one of those “poor fools” to be married as part of the treaty.

“Princess Sirena is no fool,” she reassured him.

He sniffed. “I didn’t say anything about my sister.”

“Of course not, your highness.” She gave his curls one final pat, more out of comfort than necessity, and pulled away.

But Lysander reached out with that preternatural fae grace and clasped her wrist with two fingers in the span of a breath. Even after all of these years, Colette was still sometimes startled by the speed with which the fae could move. She paused, aware of her pulse thumping beneath the gentle press of the prince’s fingers. He turned his head to look at her. Without the barrier of the mirror between them, his gaze fell upon her like a physical weight.

Try as she might, Colette could not quite convince herself the reaction was one of fear. She had arrived at the castle terrified of the fae, bowing and scraping and apologizing through her duties. But her two years of service to the prince had chased away those habits. She was

comfortable with him. Too comfortable, some would undoubtedly say, if they could see the ease with which she touched him when they were alone in his chambers.

Colette didn't like to consider the idea that something else caused her heartbeat to race when she was near him. The prince did not frighten her, but lately, her fondness for him did. He was a royal fae, and she was a human servant; she was far too rational to be thinking this way about him, and it frustrated her to no end that she couldn't seem to subdue her feelings.

"I've been meaning to tell you, you are free from your duties tonight," the prince said. He released her hand - the warmth of his touch lingering there - and walked over to his enormous bed, where leafy green vines formed a natural canopy. A handful of pink flowers unfurled on the vines, and then quickly closed again; plants always reacted to the prince's moods, but Colette was not sure how to interpret this response, and Lysander's guarded expression gave no hints. He sprawled out on the white silk covers with a catlike grace, his arms stretching above and his head lolling to one side to look at her. He gave every appearance that he was at ease, but the shifting vines around the bed indicated otherwise.

Gods, he was beautiful, all long limbs and sharp cheekbones. Colette was so distracted by the sight of him and the mercurial plants that it took a moment to process his words. Then she blinked, surprised.

"You won't have need of me at the festivities?" Despite his insistence to the contrary, it was obvious he was nervous. Usually he preferred to have her at his side or near to it at such events, and this was perhaps the most significant night in the prince's life thus far.

He waved a hand in a lazy gesture. "I will be fine."

Maybe it was intended as a kindness, but to Colette it felt strangely like a dismissal. Now that she considered it, he had waved her off early when he went out drinking the night before,

too. And he was clearly declining to invite her into his confidence this morning, as he so often had before. It was almost as though he was hiding something from her.

And of course, there was the nature of the Wylde Hunt he was hosting tomorrow. Colette did not know precisely what went on during the fae's annual festival... but she had heard the shrieks and laughter floating out from the trees, and knew that the lords and ladies emerged from the forest looking rumpled and smug and all too satisfied, so she had a guess about what went on.

The feeling gnawed at her, but she only bowed her head in acknowledgement. He was a prince, after all. There was nothing she could do but accept what he said. "As you say. I hope you enjoy yourself, your highness.

Lysander grinned at her from the bed, so sharp and pretty that the expression looked indecent - which made her stomach sink even lower when he said, "Trust me, I shall."