

Chapter One

Eric was dead if the Fae caught him. There were eight humans who managed to escape tonight. They were taken from forests all over the country and every single one of them suffered torture and gruelling training to serve the Fae. Humans were detested by the Fae, who lived in forests and bodies of water. None of them thought twice about taking humans and keeping them as slaves.

A stray branch snuck past Eric's hand and whipped across his freckled face his Lord liked so much. Tears welled in his eyes, groaning from the sting. His body was still sore after what Lord Aimar put him through earlier tonight. At least he was more gentle than he normally was, since Eric only took a few whips across his back before the Lord finished with him. Despite that, he pressed his body forward, leading the other humans through the dark woods.

Five years have passed since Eric was abducted by the Fae. One hiking trip over the weekend was all it took for his life to end. The memory was burned in his brain, the nightmares it caused was proof enough.

One second, he was hiking up a trail in the summer sun, the next, he was dragged off into the woods. A hand made of oak had clamped over his mouth with a strong acrid taste on his tongue. Despite struggling, a human was no match for a supernatural being and in the blink of an eye, he was gone. So was his freedom.

Eric's teeth gnashed together, remembering the moment he was handed over to Lord Aimar. Nothing prepared him for the countless nights of being beaten and then enthralled through magic to please Lord Aimar. Apparently Eric's brown curls crowning his hazel eyes was enough to please Lord Aimar and buy him. He was nice to Eric at first, during the daytime at least. It was when night fell that he

showed what he really was. That was why he ran through the woods tonight with the others, a desperate attempt to escape.

Eric hardened his jaw, ignoring the burn in his lungs and limbs, and tried to focus on the darkness in front of them. The trees grew differently here, twisted and changed by the magic the Fae breathed into the Earth. They grew like mountains with their roots sprawling and breaking through the ground. The only sound in the woods was of their feet crunching through the dirt and the panting of their breathing. Then, a voice called to Eric. It was sudden and crippling.

Follow me.

The voice that was not his own, was deep and melodic, like it was trying to coax him. The kind of voices one hears when a Fae was hypnotizing you. His feet skidded to a stop, all his muscles going rigid before relaxing. All of the anxieties and fears running through his mind halted, before calming themselves. Barely aware that the rest of the group stopped, panic lacing their voices as they called out to him, he stood as still as a tree.

Then, like walking out of a fog, the voice stopped. As he blinked away the dreamlike voice and back to reality, it was already fading away from his memories. As he looked up, he was not sure where he was at first.

"Hello?" Eric called out.

His voice echoed far off into the woods, paranoia settling in when there was no response. Shaking his head, his thoughts tried to focus and figure out where he actually was. Twisting trees and roots were all that surrounded him. That, and several eyes on him.

"Eric?" Alex asked.

Black hair fell out of her bun and into her deep brown eyes. She stared wide eyed, concern lacing her expression. He noticed a small cut across her pale cheek.

A branch must have hit her. He thought, frowning.

"Did anyone else feel magic?" His voice panted.

Everyone shook their head.

"No one tasted anything?"

When everyone still said nothing he rubbed at his neck. Alex's hand touched the side of Eric's arm. He looked up at her soft brown eyes peering back at him. She was one of the kindest people he ever met and without her, he probably would have died in the first year. She gave him hope. Worrying her was the last thing he wanted.

"Just being careful." He smiled. "We should keep moving."

She nodded, her hand falling away from his arm.

Eric glanced behind them one last time, making sure there were no Fae trailing behind. When the yawning woods that faded into a void stared back, he turned and strode back to the front of the group. When he passed Aaron, he scowled. He hated Eric ever since Alex took him under her wing. He was somehow not broken by the Fae lords or the Royal Court life but that only meant it affected him in other ways.

Eric's fingers were cold and muddy as he rubbed the sweat and sticky brown hair from his forehead. The wounds on his body were starting to throb. It wasn't long as they ran until another broken

tree branch dug into his arm, raking the skin. Air sucked in through his teeth, looking down at the gash. A deep bruise was already flowering around the shallow wound along his forearm and wrist.

Just keep going. He calmed myself. *This is our chance to be free. To see my brother again.*

He rubbed around his wound, looking back up and felt his breath hitch. The trees ahead looked like they went on forever. It was getting harder to see his own hands, let alone see where he was walking. As a tremor ran through his body, he slowly looked up to see where the moon was. The sun, or moon, there was no way of telling which anymore, was completely blotted out by the trees.

A sick feeling blossomed in Eric's stomach. Worse than the darkness that filled the air was the silence. No wind to shake through the trees, no birds, no humans. The only sound right now was his breath, which was starting to shake. Goose bumps rose on his arms as he controlled his rising panic. His shoddy leather boots were soaking wet and streaked with mud at this point, squishing with every step. Now that it was nearing pitch-black, it would make going anywhere that much more impossible.

What the hell are we going to do? The panic nestled in, getting comfortable in his brain. *It can't end like this.*

Eric's chest started to feel tight like there wasn't enough air until he couldn't breathe altogether. This was a terrible time to have a panic attack. Blood rushed through his ears, pulse hammering in his ears. He wanted to run, to scream, but his body refused to listen. His legs trembled from the increasing chill running through my body.

Then the voice called out again. He tasted bitter lemon. The voice was more harmonious this time, humming as it spoke. It was heavy, like the weight of falling into a deep sleep.

"Follow me. Don't falter. Trust me."

He knew in his bones that he shouldn't listen to the voice. He should turn around to try and buy time for the rest of them, anything but move with the others. Yet, every muscle compelled him forward, towards the voice calling out to him. Away from the rest of them, from Alex and Aaron.

"Follow me, past the quiet sun and moon, run to me."

Now he understood what it probably felt like to hear a siren's call. The enchanting voice drew him in further and he followed its words. He had no idea what the strange and cryptic words meant but he could *feel* the pull of its voice in his body. His thoughts screaming to run, to stop, drifted away as he wandered into the abyss after the voice's call.

"Follow me. I have always known you. Your twisted fate is unavoidable. Follow me."

The same words kept repeating over and over, lulling and convincing him of everything it said, even if he didn't understand. So Eric went further and further in and at some point, the weight in his heart and limbs seemed to lift. The dread and exhaustion all but drifted away and were replaced with a fervent desire for help.

The pull encompassed all of his thoughts and he had no idea how long he was trudging through the woods until the comforting caress of the voice vanished. The first clear sound he heard was screaming that rang out in the night.

Eric's head whipped around to where the cries of fear and agony came from. His feet moved before he could think, moving at a dead sprint. Racing through the trees, his skin being lacerated, he struggled to think of a strategy. The only thing that could be used against Fae it seemed, was other magic. Magic that humans never had. The unmistakable noise of whistling metal cut through the air.

"No!" He screamed.

Alex was there; he had to hope she was still alive and it wasn't her screams seconds ago. Another scream ripped through the forest. This one was closer.

A root broke through the ground and he slammed into it, sending him hurtling head first into the earth. The sound of bone crunching filled his head, followed by the sharp pain of his nose breaking. Blood poured from his nostrils and onto his dirtied black clothes. Groaning in pain, he rolled onto his back and struggled to breathe through his mouth. The metallic taste of blood drowned out any hope of sensing magic now.

There was no time to waste though, so Eric stumbled to his feet, hanging his head as he fought to gain his balance. Blood dripped from his face steadily now. A third scream echoed into the night.

Damn it. He cursed and heaved himself forward.

He could barely manage a jog, everything now throbbing in pain and swollen. Each breath came out in ragged hitches. He followed the noise of magic and screams, weaving his way through the roots and winding branches. Another root jutted from the dirt and he was able to see this one fast enough, until he looked down and saw what the root actually was. A human corpse.

A massive pool of blood darkened the forest floor around the body. His breath stopped as Eric jerked his head around to look for any of the Fae that were hunting them. They all knew the penalty for attempting to escape, death. This was their worst-case scenario. A shred of guilt ran through him when relief flooded through him as he saw the dead body wasn't Alex.

How many are there? His thoughts raced as he slunk low to the ground. *How close are they?*

Sneaking through the woods, his relief was short-lived as he found the other bodies. Deep brown eyes were wide and staring up at nothing. Alex's body was gored, a gaping hole in her abdomen where all

her organs should have been. Eric's hands balled into fists, fighting not to scream. There was someone other than himself alive, so he had to give them a fighting chance.

Eric turned, his entire body aching as he did, and cried out into the night at the top of his lungs. If he could draw the Fae to him, whoever was left might have a chance. The dark forest fell silent as the air left his lungs, leaving his throat ragged. So he waited, his heart hammering. As a sob came from behind him, he swivelled to follow the noise, just to feel the ice-cold sting of metal pressed against his back. The blade pressed further, slicing through his muddy shirt and nicking his flesh.

We were so close. Is it really going to end like this? I want to see my family.

A heavy boot kicked at the back of Eric's knees, knocking him down with so much force his arms instinctively went out to cushion his fall. Skin ripped off his palms as they scraped against the roots and crags jutting from the ground. One of his knees bashed into a stray root that poked out of the ground. Pain jolted through his arms and legs.

Rage was the only thing that tempered the pain singing through his entire body. He could see blood trickling from his knee where his pants were ripped. As Eric turned to look at who was currently assaulting him, part of his mind was somewhere else.

The taste of magic is so strong it's nauseating. Where are the rest of the Fae bastards?

Then he saw him. In front of Eric, with a smooth metallic spear still pointed at him, was an impossibly beautiful being. His hand was wrapped around Aaron's neck.

He understood now why there weren't other Fae around. They didn't need to be, not with a member of the Royal Family hunting the humans. He was the ruthless and cold Fourth Prince of the Royal Family, Cithrel Aloneth.

He's breathtaking. The only thought Eric's brain could supply while he currently had a weapon pointed at him.

"How did you escape, human?"

Stunned, he blinked at him. Then, coming back to reality, he collected himself and ignored his blood pumping faster. As heat filled his face, he felt himself being aroused the longer he stared at the Prince. Already, his pants felt tight.

No. His thoughts shouted. *Fight it. It's just his thrall.*

Deep blue eyes bore into Eric's plain hazel ones, full of killing intent. The grip on Aaron's neck tightened and he whimpered. The Fourth Prince's spearhead moved and touched the skin at Eric's throat, a shallow cut on his skin. His throat bobbed, containing the fear and pain rushing through him.

Seeing the Royal Family in passing at Court was entirely different than being this close to them. They didn't look like the other Fae. The stronger their bloodline, the stronger their magic. The Royal Family was the oldest bloodline in existence as far as any slave knew.

The Fourth Prince had flawless marble skin, with a complicated arrangement of platinum braids that hung past his shoulders. His bloodline made his entire family look impossibly beautiful, divine even. Despite Aaron trembling in his hold, the Prince was magnificent. Shimmering silver armour hugged his body like a second skin.

Eric's eyes slid up and down his body. Gnarled looking roots decorated the fine metal. Somehow, it only made him look more muscular than he already was. He quickly looked away, not wanting to be pulled in by his power's thrall again.

As Eric's eyes roved lower, he noticed several black straps that hung loose behind the Prince, almost like suspenders. It was an effort to pull his eyes away from between the Prince's legs and was met with cruel frigid eyes. Eric was just under six feet tall but even if he wasn't on his knees, The Prince would still loom over him.

"Answer me. Now." The spearhead twisted against his throat. A trickle of blood ran down his neck, staining the collar of his filthy shirt.

The gash on his arm was starting to burn as he knelt at the Prince's mercy, more than a bruise should ever sting. The pounding in Eric's skull made it difficult to focus, fraying his thoughts. With the thrall of the Fourth Prince filling his body, he was only getting harder. He hated this power of the Fae most.

The nosebleed was finally starting to clot in his nose but it made his breathing even more laboured now. He glanced over at Aaron before answering. Aaron glared at him, shaking his head a single time. Eric let out a heavy sigh, feeling the weight of what he was about to say.

"Aaron planned this."

The Prince stared at him, apathetic. In the same breath, he crushed Aaron's windpipe and spinal cord in his hand. Aaron's body fell to ground from his grip. Aaron's glazed over eyes stared up at Eric. He steadied his quivering lips before staring back up at the Prince.

"I'm sorry." He said, not caring whether the Prince knew he was talking to Aaron and not him.

They couldn't expose their allies. Rose was one of few humans that served as servants for members of the Inner Court. Rose, in particular, served under one of the Princes and she was the only reason they were able to evade all the guards and sealing enchantments. If she was found out, not only

would she be tortured to the point she would wish for her death, but it would be worse for every other human slave for the Inner Court.

"My fate really is unavoidable." Eric said to himself, already accepting his death.

As the blade groaned under the Prince's grip, he felt the lump in his throat get bigger. The magic was spreading through his body and slowly took away his control. Magic was like poison, taking away a human's free will one way or another.

"A human's fate is meaningless." The Prince replied.

Before Eric could react, light surged out from where he held his spear, and in a flourish, his spear vanished and was replaced with a thin sword, a small curve at its point. The metal gleamed somehow despite the darkness that ebbed from the forest. His eyes fell on the blade now pointed at him. The wound on Eric's arm turned to something closer to being lit on fire then. Hissing at the pain, he hunched over, shrinking away from the Prince and his blade.

I don't want to die like this. My breath quickened. No, not like this, I want to have meaning. I want to live.

As the Prince's corded muscles flexed, bringing the blade down on Eric, the thin cord of his sanity went taut. He threw out his arm as if he could stop the sword from slicing through him, knowing full well Eric was about to be gutted. Then, the cord snapped, and the burning on his arm flared and manifested into something else.

Thorns that looked like charred metal surged out of thin air from Eric's hand that was splayed wide. The color drained from his sight, leaving everything in black and white. The thorns wrapped around

the Fourth Prince's arm that held his sword and constricted like a coiling snake. Shock and anger was now plain on his face as he struggled to fight against the thorns that converged on him and overpowered him.

It was then that the ethereal voice called out once again. *It will not end like this.*

Watching his body move and react of its own volition, none of it felt real to Eric as he was consumed by the siren voice again. Looking on helplessly, the gorgeous Prince thrashed and struggled in vain. The thorns trapped him, one tightening across his face, making it impossible for him to breathe. He was about to be suffocated or crushed, whichever one came first.

Then as the thorns appeared, they unfurled their death grip and disintegrated back into nothing. Suddenly, he was back in his own skin and Eric doubled over, gasping for oxygen.

What the hell was that? He thought panicked.

What just happened should be impossible. A human was never able to wield magic, even after some were experimented on to test the theory. Except, Eric just did. His eyes darted to the Prince then. The look in his eyes was borderline mesmerizing, enough to make his body ache for the frozen-eyed Fae Prince again.

God, what's happening to me? Eric thought, his face flushed and flustered.

The Prince though, was looking at Eric and the arm that the thorns came from. With a deep inhale, he looked down at where the Prince was looking. His lips parted as he gaped at the impossible. Eric's blood dripped down from where the thorns materialized and just below it were black scorch marks. The marks themselves wound around his forearm like a crown of ghoulish spikes. He reached out to touch it, his shaking fingertips running along the marking. The mark was still hot to the touch.

What's happening to me? He thought again, fear lacing his thoughts. *What am I going to do?*

"Get up." Cithrel Aloneth commanded, his shoulders heaving, emphasizing how much bigger and stronger he was than me.

Panic began to settle in. "What. Is. Happening to me?"

His lips formed a thin line. "Get up," he repeated, "we have to get back before sunrise."

"What? Am I a Fae now? You're going to let me live?"

He turned to face Eric, exhaling. He slid his slender blade into a leather scabbard slung across his back. The Fourth Prince towered over him, waiting.

"You're still just a human," He answered, "Let's go. We will decide what to do with you."

This time, Eric swallowed. He didn't forget that he was in front of royalty and he was enormously more powerful than all of the other Fae, including Lord Aimar. If he wanted to live, he had no choice but to obey. Turning to face him and warring with his pride, finally he dipped his head in submission.

"We?" He asked, nails digging into his already scathed palms.

"The Royal Court of Alonetha." He said, not stopping or turning around to look at Eric. "My family."