

Chapter One

It was five minutes past four when Isolt Foxfoot, having dropped her adult dignity and made a mad dash down the corridors of Lyonesse Academy like a tardy schoolgirl, paused outside the office of Professor Sebastian Seaborn and tried to catch her breath as she knocked. “Enter,” called a deep voice from within, and Isolt tried to straighten her windblown black curls and touched her drab uniform collar lightly, then opened the door. She had never met Professor Seaborn before—though she made an effort to meet most of the faculty who taught her younger sister Elaine, her long work hours made it hard to be as involved as she would like. The man seated behind the desk was handsome—no, that was too ordinary a word. He was gorgeous: a little rugged, despite his urbane attire and bookish surroundings, with short blond hair, exquisitely blue eyes, and little laugh lines around his mouth and eyes that only made him more attractive to Isolt. He was a pureblooded Fae, but he didn’t wear robes like some of the magical faculty did; instead he was dressed in a crisp white dress shirt with his sleeves rolled up to the elbow.

“Professor Seaborn, I’m sorry to be late for our appointment,” she gasped, trying not to appear too obviously out of breath.

“It’s quite all right, Miss Foxfoot. I had just put the kettle on. May I offer you some tea?”

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary. I won’t take up much of your time, I hope.” Isolt was just a little intimidated—not just by the professor, but by the surroundings in general. She had never, herself, attended the Academy, or any kind of college at all. She had been only eighteen when the accident claimed her mother and father, forcing her to take on responsibility for Elaine. Now Elaine was here, living Isolt’s dreams, and that was enough. It had to be.

“I’m sure, but I like a cup this time of the afternoon, and I do hope you’ll join me. Please sit down.”

“Thank you,” Isolt replied, trying not to stare as he measured tea into the pot. “I’m sorry to have had to trouble you at all, but...”

“This is about Elaine’s midterms, I suppose. I can imagine you’re concerned, but I’m sure she can pull her grade up before the end of term. You shouldn’t be too hard on her—all students have bad days, and she’s a bright girl who works very hard.”

Isolt bit her lip, then took a very deep breath. “That’s just it—I haven’t until the end of the term, and I’ve come to ask you to let her retake the exam.”

Sebastian’s eyebrows shot up and he stopped in the middle of opening a cookie tin. “*Excuse me?*” His warm tone had become quite frosty.

“That grade won’t do,” Isolt said, trying for a steady tone. “I need you to let her retake it.”

He frowned, standing up very straight. “I had thought Elaine a sensible girl, and I had not

thought her capable of stooping so low—to send you to beg for her to receive unfair advantages.”

“Oh, no!” Isolt’s meager composure was quite shredded by that. “No, you don’t understand—she begged me not to come today, so if you’re going to despise anyone, let it be me, please. My sister would never dream of asking such a thing!”

Sebastian tilted his head, taken aback by her urgency. “Then why would you? As I’ve said, she’s quite capable of recovering from the grade—if she works very hard, she can still even get an A. She’s quite engaged with the class, and seems to genuinely like the subject, which is more than I can say for most of my pupils.”

“She does,” Isolt answered in a small voice, forcing herself to keep her head erect, gaze fixed on his face. “She wants to work in spell translation eventually, and she loves your class. She says learning about cultural geography makes the words and languages come alive. But...as I said, there isn’t time. I—I need her grade to improve by the end of the week.”

There was a little quiet while Sebastian resumed his quiet tea making, then put a tray on the desk between them. “Milk? Sugar? What happens at the end of the week?”

“Just sugar.” Isolt closed her eyes for just a moment, summoning all her resolve. “I’m not sure if you know, but our grandfather died two weeks ago.”

“I didn’t know—my sympathies. You think that’s why Elaine performed badly on the exam?” The hostility that had evinced itself on Isolt’s request was quite gone now, and he seemed merely interested in the problem at hand.

“I know it is,” Isolt answered. “But that’s not why I’ve come to ask you to help us. You see—there’s a custody hearing at the end of this week. Elaine is still just eighteen years old, and because of our Fae blood...because the Fae don’t see me as a proper adult...I’m afraid they will take her away from me. And I can’t let that happen.” All her hesitation faded as a protective fierceness showed itself in her dark eyes. “I’m all she has. I’ve taken care of her almost by myself for the last ten years. We were both technically in my grandfather’s custody, but I’ve worked and worked to keep a roof over our heads...It’s ridiculous. I’m twenty-eight years old, and we’re not much more than a quarter Fae. There’s no reason for it.” The age of majority for the Fae was thirty years old, since their extended lifetime made the dangerous, reckless period of adolescence longer.

“And you think they are leaning towards taking her from you? Surely that’s not reasonable under the circumstances unless there’s a family member who can look after her.”

“There’s not,” Isolt said flatly. “But they think—they kept asking questions about the hours I work. It’s true, I’m not home often, but I take good care of her! You know what a good girl she is.”

Sebastian nudged a chocolate cookie towards her. “Of course I do. You’ve done a remarkable job raising her. Where do you work?”

“At the Elysian Fields—the care facility for the elderly. Mostly humans, of course, but some werewolves too, and a few clanless Fae. I’m a caregiver, and I get called on to take a

second shift to cover for someone pretty often. And...well, we can't very well leave the residents alone, and I need the money. Elaine never complains, but even just her books are so expensive that sometimes she has to use the library copies. The kinship courts think she's left unsupervised too often, and they're afraid her Fae blood will cause mischief. It doesn't matter what I say, they don't listen. And if they see this grade...I need to show them you see? That everything is well in hand." Now that Isolt's habitual proud reserve was broken, the words tumbled out, all the difficulties and worry. "They'll send her to some kind of foster home, probably Fae, and that *will* ruin her, to be alone and frightened and perhaps harshly treated by strangers. She's doing so well here—she needs stability. She needs me." Isolt picked up the cookie finally; the flood of saliva in her mouth at the smell of the chocolate reminded her she hadn't eaten since breakfast, and she crunched it eagerly, letting the simple food sustain her.

"Absolutely," Sebastian agreed immediately. "If they're at all concerned for Elaine, having her stay with you ought to be the first priority. But it sounds like they're viewing her more as a potential liability than a person. You haven't any ties to the Foxfoot clan?"

Isolt shook her head. "Our father was—he was expected to marry someone else. He never spoke to his parents or any of the Foxfoots after his marriage."

"I see." He thought about that for a long moment, sipping his tea. "Surely you can get character witnesses, though? Someone to speak for you?"

"Yes, but...mostly human, you see. So I'm afraid they won't listen." Isolt scowled. "If I were married, none of this would be an issue—they even told me that! As if a husband would make me any better able to care for her."

"I suppose there's not someone who could step into that role?" he asked, trying to be delicate about it. "Not an ideal solution, of course, but given the urgency..."

Isolt gave a little laugh and then winced at how ugly it sounded. "When have I had time for a boyfriend? Elaine is my whole life...and because of that, I'm going to lose her." She swallowed hard, trying not to let her self-pity get the better of her, then looked at her watch. "I should be getting back to work now—I only have an hour off. About the midterm..."

"I'm happy to do what I can to help," Sebastian answered readily. "But I'm not sure a high midterm is going to be enough, and if she's under as much pressure as it seems, she might not perform well enough anyway—listen, when do you get off? Let me take you for coffee and we can talk about this more. There may be more I can do—at the least I could be a witness for you."

"I—" Isolt looked flustered, not having expected such support. But his warm blue eyes were gentle and all too appealing. "Not till nine. Too late, I'm sure."

But Sebastian shook his head. "Nine will do very well. I'll pick you up at work, Miss Foxfoot—Isolt, if I may."

She gave a little, quick nod, then said, "Yes—yes, S-Sebastian. Thank you." She rose, wanting to get out of his office before she made a fool of herself—assuming she hadn't done so already. What a fool she was, growing as flustered as one of his silliest students at the prospect

of talking to him again. He was so handsome that women probably swooned over him all the time. He'd probably be horribly embarrassed if she didn't pull herself together. Cool. Mature. She could do that. "I'll see you this evening."

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It was early evening when Sebastian arrived at his sister's apartment, looking a little sheepish. "I didn't mean to drop by at dinner time—it just happened that way."

"Mhmm. It always just happens that way. Good thing Roger doesn't mind." But for all her sharp words, Freya kissed her brother's cheek tenderly and took his coat with a gently solicitous air. "Drink?"

"Please." Sebastian sank into a chair, sniffing the air. "Spirits, that smells incredible." Sebastian's brother-in-law, Roger, was an executive chef who enjoyed spoiling his beautiful wife on his days off.

"Paella. Easy to add another dish, thankfully." Freya brought a couple of whiskey and sodas then perched on the arm of his chair. "What's up—everything all right?"

"It's fine—better than, maybe. Freya, what would you think about my getting married?"

There was a pause, then she said, almost a shade too readily, "I should think it was high time, of course. I've told you for years you ought to find someone to keep you from getting old and cranky."

"Ah, but for years I had a little sister who was more trouble to me than half a dozen wives," he said, taking her hand and squeezing it affectionately. "But—it's not exactly a love match I mean."

"What is it then?" Freya asked. "Did Mother come up with some abominable cross-eyed third cousin for you? I thought she'd given up on that."

"She has—at least, I hope so. No, I had a meeting with the foreign studies department chair last week. He wanted to warn me my tenure hearing could be difficult, as a 'bachelor.'"

"How stupid! Why? It's not as if you need a wife to teach."

"It's not that—it's the social events, hosting visiting scholars, things like that. Apparently it's not *collegial* to be single. I didn't tell you before because I couldn't see what to do about it. But today...well, I met a woman who might do."

"Might do, you say? Did you check her teeth and veterinary records?" Freya tossed back half her drink, her almost platinum hair rippling down her back, then nodded at a signal from her husband that dinner was ready. She stood up, tugging Sebastian out of his chair and leading him into the dining room. "Roger, Sebastian met a girl."

"Congratulations." Roger Paillet was half-Fae, of Haitian origin, and tended more often than not to play the straight man to his wife's little comedy routines. There could be little doubt, though, of the mutual regard between the two, and Freya fussed over pouring out the wine before she took her seat.

“It’s hardly a matter for congratulations yet,” Sebastian answered. “But she might say yes. She needs a husband, you see.”

“Where did you find her, some anti-romance seminar? You make it sound dreadful. What can you mean, needs a husband? Is she pregnant?”

“Hardly. That would be a nightmare.” Sebastian briefly outlined his conversation with Isolt that afternoon. “Of course, I can help her find a competent advocate, and that might do—but if it didn’t, it would be too late to try anything else.”

“Sebastian, if you put your mind to it, you could woo and win any woman in Chicago in twenty-four hours,” Freya said, exasperated. “Are you really sure this is a good idea? You can’t just divorce her immediately.”

“Yes, but any other woman would expect too much, don’t you see? She’d expect, if not claiming, at least love.”

Roger, who had been listening quietly, at last spoke his thoughts. “You disdain what is very precious, brother. Loving a woman is not a burden to be feared.” He fixed his pure gold eyes on his wife, and a long look passed between them, Freya uncharacteristically solemn at the words of tenderness from her husband, but glowing with affection.

“I raised you the best of wives, so you’re right to say so. But...the nagging, all the tiresome demands. I couldn’t bear it,” Sebastian said positively. “I can’t.”

“Did I really use up all your love, Sebastian?” Freya asked, rather plaintively. “I did not think I would leave you so bereft...”

“Don’t be an ass,” he replied grumpily. “You know that’s not it. Watching you blossom in my care was the sweetest thing that has ever happened to me. But you’re my sister. It’s different. I am...too cold to form new attachments readily, and I haven’t the time to devote to it. If my tenure is approved, I’ll be eligible for a sabbatical in a few years, and I’d thought of a trip to visit the shamans of Kamchatka to do research for my next book. How would a wife like that, being dragged off to Siberia, or else left alone for a whole year?”

“And what about this woman—what’s her name?” Freya asked.

“Isolt Foxfoot—pretty, no?”

“Very. What will you do with her?”

“She won’t mind. She’s alone now but for her sister, I can’t leave her any worse off. I shall be quite sure she understands.” Sebastian played with his napkin ring, spinning it on the table as he tried to organize his thoughts. “I know I seem callous, even cruel, but I do want to help her and Elaine. The thought of that poor girl being fostered with the wrong people makes me want to smash something.”

“And what when she’s grown? Will you divorce Isolt?” Divorce was not unknown in the Fae community—their sister Liesl had divorced her cold, domineering husband some years before, fleeing to a Fae commune near San Francisco—but it was certainly not as common as among humans, and considered somewhat scandalous.

“If she wishes. Once I’m tenured, it won’t matter very much. But if we get on well,

there's no reason for it. It will be pleasant enough, I daresay, and keep my solicitous little sister from fussing over me. Isolt is very poor. I can provide her with a much more comfortable life."

Freya gave a long sigh, and her wide mouth drooped just a little, but finally she said, "If you came to ask my blessing, I suppose you have it. I hate to think of you, who sacrificed so much for me, having a happiness that is even a particle less than mine...but we all must find our own happiness, and I suppose this may be yours."

* * *

Isolt took a few minutes at the end of her shift to put on a little lipstick and comb her hair, even though she was so tired that part of her wanted to beg Sebastian to let her go home and reserve their conference for her day off, when she could think. But there was no time for that. If the hearing went badly, and Elaine was taken from her, it would be much harder to get her back. If he was willing to serve as a witness, or if he had any family connections he could use, as Isolt thought his vague hints might mean, it could make all the difference. She owed it to Elaine to talk to with him, and at that thought, Isolt straightened her spine and forced herself to smile in the mirror.

Sebastian was waiting for her outside the entrance, and he greeted Isolt warmly. "When I asked you for coffee, I forgot you mightn't have had supper yet—may I take you to a restaurant?"

"Oh..." Isolt flushed and began to demur. Why did he affect her so powerfully? That smile, the vivid shade of his eyes...they disarmed her entirely, resolved as she was. "That's very kind, but Elaine always keeps something back for me. And I'm sure you must have eaten already."

"And am in just the humor to pick off your plate and have a drink," he said agreeably, tucking her arm into his and beginning to walk.

Isolt laughed then, and the tight knot created by her long hours of difficult work loosened just a bit. How long had it been since she'd walked like this with a handsome man? Five years? More? It affected her like a gulp of brandy to a teetotaler, going straight to her head, and it took her a moment to remember that they were just going to discuss how he could help her with the hearing. Thinking about *that* dashed her right back to earth again. She really should get home—suppose a neighbor reported how late she'd been out, leaving Elaine alone? But she'd already implicitly agreed, and she'd seem mad if she refused now.

Sebastian led them further into one of the small magical enclaves nearby. "Do you like soul food? There's a good voodoo cafe near here that does the best fried chicken I've ever had. They have gumbo worthy of the name too."

"That sounds good," Isolt agreed, a little surprised at his choice. He seemed so refined, with his french cuffs and short-cropped hair, she wouldn't have expected him to pick a place like that. But she was glad—she much preferred something simple and hearty to some tortured

delicacy she'd have no idea how to eat. Before long they were in Mama Laveau's Hoodoo Eats, a rather dim and smoky establishment with vividly painted walls, an atmosphere of mystery and just a slight undercurrent of danger, as beautiful women smiled seduction at their partners and hard-eyed men talked business in low voices.

Isolt ordered a pulled pork sandwich and an iced tea, but when Sebastian ordered a beer, she changed her mind and asked for one too. It had been a long day, a long month—a long life, she thought rather dourly. She could use the opportunity to relax. She'd just taken the first pull from the ice-cold bottle when Sebastian began to speak.

"I want to tell you a little bit about me first, if I may," he began, "so that you'll see I understand your plight rather better than you might think."

"Of course." Isolt was too tired to talk much anyway.

"I have two sisters," he began slowly. "Liesl and Freya." A little hint of pleasure colored Sebastian's voice as he spoke his younger sister's name. "Liesl was my elder sister. My parents were very old-fashioned, and as soon as she was mature enough, they put her into training of the most restrictive type, and she, a docile girl, never objected. They constrained her will absolutely, punished her severely for tiny faults—they crushed my poor sister's spirit until there was almost nothing left of her. Though she was docile, you see, she wasn't a good candidate for that sort of training to be claimed by a mate. She needed encouragement, not restriction. They married her off to a man of more wealth than tenderness, and I'm *very* glad to say that she eventually divorced him. She lives in a commune in California now. I visit her sometimes and we smoke spiritgrass and I help look after the goats."

The last statement, and the little, quirky smile that accompanied it, surprised Isolt again. Apparently he wasn't really so traditional as she'd imagined at all. She realized, after a moment, that she'd been staring long and boldly into his beautiful eyes as she listened, and she dropped her gaze, waiting for him to continue.

"Freya was only a very little girl then, but seeing Liesl's unhappiness, I forbade my parents to train her. I said I'd kidnap her and take her to South America if they so much as tried. She was such a bright, special child—both my sisters are special, but Freya...Freya is a shooting star. Anyway, that didn't turn out well either. When she was twenty, and I was in the Fae Naval Services—I had just made Lieutenant Commander and was stationed in the Caribbean, Bermuda Triangle Search and Rescue—Freya had a bad accident. She'd been driving a car while she was high on some extremely illegal potions. She had a broken arm, a concussion, and enough destructive drive to do it all over again right then. I saw then that as much as training had been a danger to Liesl, lack of training was a danger for Freya. My little sister has never lacked for will, you see. But I didn't trust my parents to do it properly—I insisted she should be under my hand alone, and they were frightened and unhappy enough to agree."

Sebastian paused as Isolt's food arrived, and when the waiter left, she put in a question. "And that's why you want to help? Because of your little sister?"

He nodded. "More or less. I gave up my command and came back here to take Freya in

hand. It was both the most rewarding and most difficult thing I've ever done in my life. You see—you know about blossoming?"

Isolt, mouth full of tender, spicy barbecue, simply shook her head. She only vaguely knew what he meant about training. It was very much a Fae thing, and not something that had been part of her more diverse family's beliefs. She knew that it was a sort of preparation for the ritual of claiming that had been practiced by the Fae for millennia, though much less so in recent centuries as they became more influenced by human ideas. The claiming involved the complete surrender of a female to her mate, and involved the male publicly marking her by biting the back of her neck. Rather like cats, Isolt thought unkindly, though of course that wasn't surprising given the different evolutionary paths humans and Fae had traveled down.

"It's rare, but sometimes, when a girl gives up her will—or as in Freya's case, has it taken from her—it acts as a catalyst to dramatically heighten her magical abilities. Because she has no anxiety of choice, her development proceeds exponentially, and she's able to focus entirely on *becoming*. That is what happened to Freya. She's an augur, and a very powerful one. The flight of a single bird across the sky allows her to foretell the day with almost frightening accuracy. Knowing that the discipline I provided her enabled that was very beautiful. It nearly made up for how naughty she was," he laughed, stealing a french fry off Isolt's plate.

Isolt looked wistful. "You must be so proud of her. If I could give Elaine a gift like that, it would be the most wonderful thing I could do. But we're only a little Fae, of course," she said, deprecatingly, worried he'd think she was getting above herself.

Sebastian nodded. "Ridiculously proud, yes. She's married now, and very happy in her work. But I wanted you to know about her so you'd see that I understand about the need to protect someone you love very much. I want to help you and Elaine. She's a good girl, and you're right that such a frightening, strange transition would be very dangerous for her. Especially if she landed with the wrong family—one that might even force her into training for no reason. I will speak out as a character witness for you both, certainly, and I can talk to my cousin Jack about getting a competent advocate for you. He'd surely know one. But..."

"But?" Isolt prompted gently, continuing to eat, relaxing more as the meal settled her uncertain nerves.

Sebastian dropped his gaze, looking very uncomfortable now and stirring a french fry around in the ketchup moodily. "I will gladly do that or anything else within my power—only I have a dilemma myself...you see, I thought..." In contrast to his usual calm assurance, he was now very nearly stammering.

"What is it? What did you think?"

"Isolt, would you like to marry me?"

Chapter Two

Isolt stumbled into the door of the small, ramshackle Foxfoot home as clumsily as though she were drunk. She felt drunk. Sebastian's proposal had startled her so much she couldn't respond in any kind of coherent fashion, but had simply stared at him like a goon for a very long time, then excused herself to the bathroom to laugh hysterically. But when she came back to the table, he expanded on his point, explaining about his need for a wife, and his idea that they might be able to form a quietly compatible, complaisant partnership. Seeing that she was too dumbfounded to respond properly, he'd given her his number and asked her to think about it.

She supposed she'd probably have to do just that at some point, but being home refocused her on her usual responsibilities. "Elaine?" she called softly. There was no response, and Isolt supposed her sister might have gone to bed. There was a smell of warm food in the air, though, and Elaine wouldn't have left the oven on unless she was really distraught or ill, having had fire safety emphasized painfully and thoroughly at her older sister's hand. Their little old house, with its haphazard wiring, was a danger already without adding carelessness into the mix.

But as Isolt entered the kitchen, her face softened. The oven was still on, yes, but there was her sweet little sister, asleep at the kitchen table, her head uncomfortably pillowed on a thick numerology textbook, her homework—complete, Isolt noted proudly as she glanced over it—beside her. Isolt leaned down, brushed back a lock of dark crimson hair, and kissed Elaine's temple tenderly. The girl awoke with a soft, complaining murmur, then sat up, yawning. "Spirits, did I fall asleep? I was just going to rest my eyes—you were so late..."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Isolt said remorsefully. She'd told Elaine she'd be about half an hour late, not having planned for dinner. "I should have texted you."

"Everything okay?" Elaine gave a long stretch. "What happened when you talked to Professor Seaborn?"

Isolt hesitated for a long moment, not having considered that, as her sister had known she was going in for a conference, she'd have to give some account of the matter. "He may be able to help us. We can discuss it tomorrow," she said finally. She certainly wasn't going to tell Elaine about the proposal until she'd worked it over in her own mind. It had been her habit, ever since her parents' death, to shield Elaine from as many of her uncertainties and worries as possible, and even now that Elaine was eighteen, she was still reticent.

"Your dinner's in the oven still—I hope it's okay," Elaine said. "Professor Seaborn wasn't mad at me?"

"No, not a bit. And I'll put it away to take for lunch tomorrow—I've already eaten." A twinge of guilt assailed her at that, and the thought of the lovely barbecue she'd had for dinner, compared with the leftover stew her little sister had eaten. She should have thought to get takeaway for her.

“You went out?” Elaine didn’t sound irritated, just surprised. Isolt rarely ate out, and never without her sister.

“One of the healers ordered in since we were kept so late,” Isolt lied quickly, putting away the neglected food and casting an eye over the kitchen to make sure everything was tidied up for the night. It was, though—Elaine had done all her little chores very thoroughly. “Did you have a good day?”

“I guess,” Elaine said slowly. “Only...there was an old man in the L and he...”

“Did he touch you?” A fierce protectiveness rose up in Isolt’s eyes. “Did you forget your talisman? You know I told you to always keep it under your blouse when you’re out.”

“Ugh, no, will you let me finish? He...oh, it doesn’t matter.” Annoyed, Elaine slouched in her chair.

Isolt swallowed her exasperation at Elaine’s overreaction and sat down, holding out her hands to her sister. “I’m sorry. I worry. Please finish.”

After a brief hesitation, Elaine relented, taking the offered contact. “He looked like Grandad from behind, and I went after him—I almost called. But it was just some man.” The teenager looked as disheartened as though it might have really been her lost grandfather.

Isolt swallowed hard. It was difficult, in the flurry of arrangements and worry surrounding their grandfather’s loss, to remember that Elaine was grieving so deeply. Though Isolt had loved the old man too, she had always been working hard—at times two jobs—to support the family and had little time to bond with him in the same way her little sister had. But he had been as much of a father as Elaine had known since the accident a decade ago. “I’m sorry, baby,” she said softly. “That used to happen to me after Mom and Dad died. I thought I saw Mom so many times, and every time I hoped...”

“It’s stupid,” Elaine whispered. “I know he’s gone. I saw him buried. But I just...I still don’t understand it or believe it or...something. I don’t know.”

Giving a long sigh, Isolt hoisted herself onto her weary feet once more. “Come on, I’ll tuck you into bed. I’m sorry I didn’t text, but you should have been in bed half an hour ago.”

“Am I in trouble? I swear it wasn’t ten yet when I fell asleep. I didn’t mean to disobey.” Elaine’s bright green eyes were big and anxious.

“No, sweetheart, I know. Come on. I’ll get out your pajamas while you brush your teeth.”

“You don’t have to,” Elaine said, following Isolt. “I know you’re tired—sorry you had to work late.”

“I’m never too tired to tuck you in,” Isolt promised. It was a ritual the sisters had shared for years, and though Elaine had pushed back some as she got older, Isolt knew she enjoyed the closeness. When Elaine returned and was comfortable in her pajamas, Isolt helped her into bed, then got in to hug her close. These moments, with her precious little sister nestled against her were sometimes the only thing that got her through another long, horrible day. “My little Rose Red,” she teased softly, stroking Elaine’s vivid auburn hair.

“Beautiful Snow White,” the girl responded, kissing her sister’s cheek. “Was your day

okay?”

“Mmhmm,” Isolt responded. “Your Professor Seaborn was very nice—he thinks a lot of you.”

“I like him—a lot of teachers think they have to tell dumb jokes and stuff, put on a show to make us pay attention. He never does that. He treats us like...I dunno, people.”

“Imagine that,” Isolt laughed, but she drank in the little detail. She was interested not just because of Sebastian, but she was always fascinated by Elaine’s experience at the Academy, the time of learning and play and growth that she herself had been denied.

She snuggled Elaine a little longer, until the younger girl seemed to be growing sleepy, then gave her a last gentle kiss and went to her own little room down the hall. Though Elaine’s bedroom wasn’t much bigger than a very large closet, and Isolt’s was tiny as well, neither had been able to contemplate breaching the sanctum of Grandad’s bedroom just yet. It was still just as he’d left it.

Left it—why, oh why couldn’t he have waited only a few more years? The thought ran through her head, as it had a thousand times since he’d passed. If Elaine had been twenty-five and safe in an apprenticeship, there would have been no bother at all. And it angered Isolt that she hadn’t even leisure to grieve for the good old man, for everything else had been driven away by the threat of losing her sister.

But she didn’t have to lose her. Isolt took off her shoes with a groan and stretched out on top of the covers fully dressed. As she thought of Sebastian’s proposal again, she still couldn’t believe it. It wasn’t quite a fairy tale—he’d been rather businesslike over the whole thing—but compared to everything else in her life, it might as well have been. He’d been very clear that he meant a proper marriage, not just a legal illusion to fool the kinship courts. Isolt understood that the arrangement would benefit him as well, but to be able to quit her job! Oh, the hundreds of thousands of times Isolt had played out that exact fantasy in her head, of giving notice at that place where the sad mutterings of the elderly forced her to harden her heart so she wouldn’t weep. To never empty another bedpan, force an angry old witch to take her potions, sweep another floor.

But that wasn’t the important thing he was offering; he would help her care for Elaine as well. She could be at home when her little sister came home, could cook dinner for her more than once a week. She could buy her the pretty clothes and books she deserved, send her on trips, hire tutors... Isolt’s always vivid imagination raced as she considered all the things Sebastian’s generosity could provide. Poor Elaine wouldn’t have to do all the chores herself, falling asleep over her books as she tried to keep house and manage her studies at the same time. And Sebastian could provide what Isolt had never been able to—an educated mind to help the girl with her studies and guide her choices.

Isolt drew a long breath, forcing herself to slow down. Nothing in the world was an unalloyed good, and this surely wouldn’t be either. For one thing, he’d made it clear that she would have to act as hostess for him fairly often. It wasn’t that Isolt minded such a thing, but her

life had left her woefully unprepared to entertain scholarly guests, people of refinement and culture like Sebastian. What if she embarrassed him and he hated her for it? What if he divorced her after she'd put all her hopes and trust into him? What if his kind face was only a mask for his private self? Isolt didn't think so, but it was possible. It cheered her, some, to remember Elaine's words about him—that he didn't put on an act like other professors. Elaine might be innocent, but she was also perceptive, and Isolt trusted her judgment in this matter. If he was kind and honest with his students, then there was no real reason to think he'd be otherwise in a home arrangement he'd proposed himself. After what he'd said about his sister, he certainly wouldn't be unkind to Elaine, and they both seemed to like each other...

And Isolt and Elaine would stay together—really, did anything else matter? To refuse his offer would be a mad and cruel disservice to the young girl who depended on her absolutely. Isolt would have to be cautious, of course, and she and Sebastian would have much to discuss, but...

With her dilemma resolved, the exhausted Isolt fell asleep before she could finish her thought.

* * *

Isolt awoke as soon as the sun began to creep over the horizon, its first rays lightening her bedroom. She stretched and looked at the clock. She'd forgotten to set her alarm the night before, but she was by now so habituated to keeping disciplined hours, it scarcely mattered. She couldn't even sleep in on her days off. Her bra was digging into her ribs, and Isolt made a face, realizing she'd fallen asleep without taking off any more than her shoes. She stripped and climbed into the shower as she reviewed the events of the night before to be sure they'd really happened.

No, it hadn't been a dream, though it still felt something like one. Or like one of the vivid fantasies she played out in her head during the long hours at work. Not that she could be sure this strange scenario wouldn't still come to a bad end. She'd have to talk with Sebastian and work it all out—ensure that he would stay with her long enough that Elaine would be in no danger until she was at least safely apprenticed, if not longer. They'd have to make legal arrangements so that Isolt retained the Foxfoot house in her name. Oh, there'd be dozens of things, surely. But should they all prove agreeable, and should Elaine not find the idea *too* upsetting, Isolt was ready to agree. But Elaine would probably be delighted. She was always mentioning her friends' elder brothers and trying to get Isolt to go on dates. It was Isolt who shied away from the idea, fearing to lose sight of her duty.

Not that it was likely to be an easy conversation, Isolt thought wryly, as she pulled on her comfortable old terry robe. She hadn't yet actually told Elaine about the threat of the kinship courts, not having wanted to frighten her little sister, particularly not when she was already so unhappy. Elaine would probably be furious about having been left so in the dark. But never mind—it had been for her own good, Isolt was quite sure of that.

With that in mind, she crept into Elaine's tiny room, slipping into bed to wake her sister up gently. "Wake up, darling..."

"Mmm...no class till nine, sleeeeeeppp," Elaine begged adorably, hugging Isolt close as though she were a pillow.

"Not today, angel, we need to talk. Close your eyes," she warned.

Elaine whined and buried her face under the pillow while Isolt switched on the little bedside lamp. "Talk about wha'?" she asked, when she finally emerged.

"There's something I haven't told you." In a few sentences, Isolt outlined the situation, the jeopardy they were in, and the larger reason for her visit to see Sebastian.

Elaine's reaction was even worse than Isolt had imagined. "What?" she screeched, coming quite awake. "And you didn't tell me? How long have you known?"

"About a week," Isolt answered patiently. "Calm *down*, Elaine. I've got a solution worked out, I think. You don't need to be scared."

"I'm not *scared*," Elaine snapped. "How could you keep that from me? What, were you just going to wait until they carted me off to some *stranger's* house and tell me to pack a bag half an hour beforehand?"

"Stop being so dramatic," Isolt sighed, already feeling a headache coming on. For all her sweetness, Elaine could be temperamental and difficult at times. Now was apparently one of those times. "Can't you see I was trying to protect you? And I will, you see, I'm going to—"

"I don't care. I seriously don't. I don't care what you've figured out. I know you'd never let them take me away, and I know we'd run away first. But I'm eighteen now, Isolt. I'm not a little girl anymore. You can't just keep things from me like this. It's not fair."

"You've been dealing—"

"I don't want to hear about that," Elaine interrupted rudely. "I don't care about your stupid justifications. You do this stuff just because you can, because you won't believe I can understand stuff and handle it."

Isolt's patience was entirely at an end. "Go get the paddle," she ordered shortly. "*Now*."

"That's it? You're going to *spank* me? I can't believe you!"

"I'd suggest you believe me, and very quickly unless you want it to be Grandfather's cane instead." Isolt wasn't a hundred percent sure she'd carry through with that, but Elaine was terrified of the cane, and Isolt was beyond tired of the argument.

Elaine opened up her mouth as if to argue again, but the threat worked, and she went over to her bureau to retrieve the paddle from the drawer and handed it to Isolt, avoiding her sister's gaze, her face still angry.

Isolt sat up and patted her lap. "Pajamas down and over my knee, young lady. I won't tolerate that kind of talk, and you know it. You're going to have a very sore bottom to remind you of that today."

Elaine didn't answer, but she let her pajamas and panties fall to her knees and went over her sister's lap, burying her unhappy, flushed face in her arms. Isolt didn't give her any kind of

warm-up. Elaine had been very naughty and deserved a hard spanking, and she was going to get one. Isolt lifted the paddle and brought it down hard on her sister's fair, soft bottom, eliciting a grunt of pain and making the skin flush up pink immediately. She scolded as she spanked, the loud cracks of the paddle making a percussive accompaniment to her firm voice. "If I treat you like a little girl, Elaine, it's because you *are* a little girl. My little girl, and you'll understand that if I have to blister your bottom every single morning. I won't tolerate disrespect." The word was emphasized with an extra hard spank on the back of Elaine's thighs that made the girl whimper and writhe. "You're allowed to be upset, but you are *not* allowed to yell at me and question my judgment like that. Little brats who do things like that get spanked, do you understand?"

There was no answer, and Isolt set her mouth in a grim line, upping the force of her strikes and focusing mostly on the soft undersides of the tender little cheeks and the sensitive thighs. "Do. You. Understand?" she gritted out again, the paddling now very harsh indeed. Elaine would indeed be feeling the spanking all day, and for the next few, probably. Little bruises were already forming, and Elaine was whining and squirming, but still not yielding. "I can keep this up a *lot* longer than you can, young lady, so you may as well give up." Isolt was working hard to keep her temper in check—she tried very hard never to punish Elaine when she was really angry—but she was frustrated that she couldn't have a conversation with her sister, couldn't even bring an end to the spanking because her stubborn little brat of a sister wouldn't give in.

Elaine's bottom was bright, burning red now, and she was beginning to struggle a little, but Isolt pinned her with a strong hand on the small of her back. "Let go, little baby. Say you understand. Are you sorry?" She picked a single spot at the top of Elaine's thigh near the inside and began spanking it over and over, torturing the spot cruelly to force her sister's surrender. As she heard gasping, sobbing sounds, and after about a dozen or more blows, she moved to the corresponding place on the other thigh and did the exact same thing again.

"I'm sorry!" Elaine wailed finally. "I understand...please, Isolt...hurts so much..."

Isolt wasn't quite done with her naughty little sister yet, though. She moved to the sit spot on Elaine's left cheek and began heating it the same way. "Do you understand that disrespectful little brats get spanked? Say it."

"I understaaaaannnd," Elaine sobbed. "Please...be such a good girl..." She shrieked and gave another despairing wail as Isolt, rather than stopping, simply moved to her right sit spot. "I was a disrespectful brat...needed a spanking...please...sorry, Isolt..."

That, at last, was enough. After three hard blows placed solidly over the center of Elaine's well-punished bottom, Isolt laid the paddle aside and pulled her tearful little sister up and into her arms for a gentle cuddle while the sweet girl whispered penitence and promises of good behavior. "Shh...it's okay now, baby," Isolt whispered, kissing Elaine's hair and cheeks and the tips of her gently pointed ears. "It's all okay...why did you have to make it so hard, sweetheart?"

"Don't know," Elaine wept. "I really don't. Just...so mad...scared, I guess. Why wouldn't

you tell me that, Isolt?” Her voice was meek and sorrowful now.

Isolt gave a long, sad sigh. “Because I was scared too, baby. So scared. You’re right—I wouldn’t let them take you, and we *would* run away if we had to. But I didn’t know what to do, and I didn’t want you to be afraid when you were already so unhappy about Grandad.”

“What *are* we going to do?” Elaine asked, looking up at Isolt trustfully. “Go away?”

“No, not that. It’s a funny thing, but my trip to see your Professor Seaborn yesterday turned out to be a good idea, though I don’t think you’ll be taking that midterm over...”

* * *

Isolt texted Sebastian later that morning and, not without some anxiety, invited him to come over that evening for dessert. He readily accepted, and Isolt took her lunch hour to go home and do some extra cleaning in the sitting room. It wasn’t dirty or untidy, but since tonight would be Sebastian’s first impression of where she lived, she wanted everything to be immaculate. She could, of course, have had Elaine do it, and her little sister, who was always very meek indeed after a hard spanking, would have obeyed, but Isolt didn’t want to disrupt her studies.

Still, when the doorbell rang that night, she was fussing over a nearly invisible thread of spider silk on the curtains and called, nervously, “Elaine, do go answer it.”

“Yes, Isolt.” Elaine, who had suffered much inspection and fussing herself that evening, did as she was told, and a moment or two later returned, leading Sebastian into the sitting room.

He looked as handsome as ever, Isolt thought, almost despairingly, as though he might have grown uglier since the night before. But he was smiling, and he said, “I smell something heavenly—you haven’t been baking?”

“Elaine did actually,” Isolt said proudly. “Just some cookies, but I thought something fresh would be nice. Will you have coffee at this hour? Or I have a very good herbal tea blend—my father’s recipe.”

“I can drink coffee at any hour, thank you. What a very comfortable little home you have.” Sebastian sat down in an armchair, looking around as Elaine disappeared tactfully to fetch the coffee. In a lower voice, he added, “Have you spoken with your sister about this yet?”

Isolt nodded. “She’s quite pleased—I think she has some rather silly ideas about it, though I was very clear it was a practical arrangement.”

Sebastian smiled a little. “A romantic sister is a blessing and a curse. I should know. Freya had quite a lot to say herself.”

“What does she think about it?”

He shrugged. “I have her blessing, more or less. I suppose that must seem silly to you, my asking my married little sister about it.”

“No,” Isolt answered honestly. “You love her—you asked her just as a younger man would his parents, or an older man his daughter, even if she were married.” She smiled as Elaine

brought in the tray very carefully. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

“May I be excused to bed?” Elaine said softly, and Isolt wasn’t sure whether she wanted to hug her or shake her for how obviously she was trying to give the two privacy.

“You may,” Isolt said. “Is all your homework done?”

Elaine nodded, and turned to go, but Sebastian said, “No, stay a little while, Elaine. Your sister and I have many things to discuss, but you ought to be part of at least some of that. Isolt said she told you about our discussion last night?”

Elaine looked at Isolt for permission, then sat down, a little gingerly, beside Isolt on the soft sofa. “Yes, Professor.”

“And what do you think about it? Is there anything you’re worried about?”

The young girl worried her lip between her teeth, thinking. “Will you be kind to Isolt?” she blurted out finally.

“Elaine!” Isolt said, mortified.

Sebastian laughed. “Don’t scold her—if you weren’t going to ask it, you ought. I hope to be kind indeed. I’m an even-tempered man, though I am used to obedience in my home. I’m sure it was so with your parents; your father was mostly Fae, yes?”

“Yes,” Isolt murmured. “It was like that. I understand.” Male Fae were more or less biologically hardwired for dominance, and though their customs had become less extreme over the ages, particularly as they mingled and married with humans and absorbed their thought, they had not left off the old ways entirely. And they had brought their own influence into the magical community, where it was usual for even human heads of household, usually fathers, but sometimes matriarchs, to keep a cane as a sign of their authority. Many kept it more or less symbolically, but quite a few used it as needed.

“I prefer warning to correction,” Sebastian continued. “Certainly with a wife, and with a little sister too. I’m not saying that to scare you,” he said to Elaine gently. “But I would answer your question as fully as possible and as honestly as you put it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Professor Seaborn,” Elaine said, but in a rather small voice.

“I know how much Isolt treasures you,” he said quietly. “And having known you as my pupil, I understand why. My desires for a family are largely selfish, I must confess, but I hope I am an honorable man, and I hope that my role in your lives will be as beneficial as yours in mine. You’re a bright girl, Elaine, and I can help guide your studies as you progress at the Academy. And your sister is a very brave, special woman, but I think you know she has taken too much on herself for too long—for the best and noblest of reasons. I hope to ease those burdens, even as I hope she will be a pleasure and a comfort to me.”

Elaine had been looking down at her hands, but when he spoke of Isolt, she lifted her gaze and fixed her brilliant emerald eyes on his blue ones. “Okay,” she said at last, nodding.

Isolt swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the lump that had risen in her throat at his words. “If you’ve decided to give your permission,” she said tartly, “go upstairs, Elaine. Sebastian and I have many things to discuss, and this may all be very premature.”

“Sorry,” Elaine answered. She was still very meek, Isolt noticed, putting it down to the harsh punishment she’d had to give that morning. The girl gave her sister a kiss on the cheek and then, hesitantly at first, kissed her professor’s cheek as well, murmuring her good nights.

Sebastian smiled at Elaine’s caress, patting the girl’s shoulder, and when she had gone, said, “She’s a very sweet girl. I’m glad I have her blessing.”

“She is,” Isolt said firmly. “Now—I suppose you’ll want some protections to make sure I won’t try to run away and make claims on you, and...” She began laying out all her thoughts on the matter, and they went back and forth for a good hour or so, drinking coffee, eating the whole plate of cookies, and establishing the grounds of their life together. Sebastian was pleasant, firm and clear throughout the discussion, generous but reasonable. He agreed to all Isolt’s modest terms—that he would provide for Elaine’s education at the Academy so long as he and Isolt were married, that the house would be legally structured to remain in Isolt’s name as his property would in his, and he laid out terms for household expenses and a personal allowance that were far more than Isolt had expected. He also laid out his wishes—for her to entertain his guests, attend events with him, and provide a proper and comfortable home environment.

Finally, shyly, Isolt said, “And what about...the marriage bed?” She had, of course, been thinking about it quite a lot—much more than she meant to, all day long, but she had avoided speaking of it till last.

He nodded, as calmly as though it were just another business item. “Since the union we propose is to be a marriage, if a rather pragmatic one, and not a legal illusion, I shall expect us to enjoy married congress. I imagine some complaisancy may be appropriate on both parts—you, especially, are young, and may certainly have some fancies of your own—but maintaining a mistress is costly and far more emotionally draining than you might imagine. Will that be a problem?” His blue eyes, luminescent like all the Fae, held hers.

“No, Sebastian,” Isolt said softly, still wondering a little at that. It certainly wouldn’t be a problem for her! He was gorgeous, and he had to know it. The lines on his face—fewer than a human his age would have shown—only added to his attractiveness, lending it delineation and character. “Only what about children? That would make things more complicated...”

Sebastian nodded. “It would indeed. My family is rather notoriously fertile—three children to one family isn’t much to humans, of course, but to my people it’s nearly unheard of. I’ll see an apothecary about getting you a contraception potion.”

Isolt nodded slowly. It made sense. Though this was hardly an experiment, neither of them were ready yet for the kind of commitment having children together would entail. “I...I think that’s everything.”

“Then I shall ask again, Isolt...will you marry me?” Sebastian smiled, anticipating now her response.

“Yes, please, Sebastian.” Isolt found herself speaking as meekly as Elaine might have done. “I...can’t begin to say how grateful I am to you for this. I will try so hard to be a good wife...” She looked up at him from under her long dark lashes, heart beating very quickly.

He let out a soft breath, then patted his knee once, briefly. “Come here then, sweetheart, and give me a kiss.”

Isolt rose and moved towards him very slowly—everything felt rather like a dream. She hadn’t been near a man in so long...she hadn’t been entirely chaste for the last decade, but her few, unsatisfying adventures in the last several years had been conducted in discretion and haste on lunch hours and days off, and none, even at the height of passion, had stirred her as Sebastian could with a single look. She perched on his knee rather primly, looking down at him rather solemnly.

Sebastian reached up to stroke her cheek. “Nervous, sweetheart?”

She shook her head. “Only I keep waiting to wake up,” she confessed. Then she leaned down, letting her arm drape around his shoulders and pressing her lips lightly to his. Sebastian didn’t deepen the kiss right away, but stroked one of her delicate, slightly pointed ears, making the sensitive nerve endings there thrill, and she batted it very slightly under the attention before giving a soft sigh and relaxing further into his arms. Then he threaded his fingers through her dark curls, his tongue coaxing her lips apart for him, making her yield and accept. The kiss was like a slow dance—like two strangers meeting in a dim room, recognizing nothing but the connection between them and the rhythms that drove them. Sebastian was gentle, exploring her mouth in a leisurely way, finding out what made Isolt gasp and squirm under his attentions. He tightened his fingers a little in her hair and smiled against her lips at the soft moan she made.

By the time he broke the kiss, Isolt was no longer upright, but leaning against his shoulder, her hand resting on his chest, feeling his heartbeat. “Woken up yet?” he said, smiling.

Isolt shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Good dream?” He let his fingers drift down to the nape of Isolt’s neck, and she gasped again as the tiny hairs there seemed to rise up at his touch.

“The best I’ve had in a long time,” she admitted honestly. A little hesitant, but eager to show her desire with more than words, she lifted her own fingers to dance over the lines of his face, lightly tracing the worry line between his eyes before touching his beautifully defined cheekbones and drifting down his strong jaw to the open neck of his dress shirt. Seeing nothing but pleasure and permission in his fathoms deep blue gaze, she unbuttoned another couple of buttons so she could rest her palm against the smooth muscle of his chest. “A handsome storybook knight from the Faerie courts of old appeared to whisk me away from my life of drudgery,” she said whimsically.

“Are you sure you saw him quite clearly?” Sebastian asked gently, massaging her neck now and kissing her brow lightly. “Was he not somewhat careworn? His armor a little tarnished perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” Isolt returned, “but only because he had not kept it fine with just court appearances. He was a truly gallant knight, I think.” Her heart beat faster, and she meant it. Sebastian’s offer was tempting, but principally because of who he was. If she could not have trusted him with her little sister and, less importantly, herself, she might have refused. But his

honorable approach to her and Elaine and all he had done for his own sister had convinced Isolt where security and money alone would not have.

They kissed again, and Sebastian held Isolt close, one hand rubbing her bottom in an easy, intimate sort of way. It was as though, Isolt thought, they were already married, as though all strangeness and uncertainty had been bypassed on the way to this, to the warm comfort of one another's bodies. But then his hand moved to her thigh, and all thoughts of comfort and familiarity fled, for Isolt had never felt such electricity as the touch of his fingers there, even through her pantyhose. "Nnnhh...Sebastian..." she moaned.

"Beautiful girl," he breathed against her lips. "What a tempting witch you are with your black hair and eyes. I'd like to make you ride me in this chair right now."

"Oh...oh, no, Elaine..." Isolt said wildly, squirming, though not in a particularly convincing way. He made her so hot she felt drunk, and the only thing keeping her from yielding immediately to his lewd suggestion was her sense of responsibility.

"You'd have to be quiet," he teased. "Very quiet like a good girl...are you going to be a good girl for me, Isolt?"

She nodded, eyes wide, but said again, "Oh, please, no...not like this."

Sebastian sighed a little, but good-humoredly. "Perhaps not. Forgive me for teasing. You are to be my proper wife, and you deserve a proper wedding night, even if your groom is rather impatient." He kissed her face again a few times, over her nose and cheeks. "But you are very sweet when you blush, and very warm, and if you squirm on my lap once more, Isolt, I cannot promise restraint."

Standing up was one of the hardest things Isolt had ever done, and even after she bade Sebastian good night with another long kiss and retired to bed, she stared at the ceiling, wakeful, unwilling to lose a moment of her sweet dream to sleep.