

“It also means our agreement from our engagement was less balanced than I thought.”

It was a dangerous statement to say given the fae’s tenacity in bargaining—and one I would have risked saying to very few people. But I knew with Rigel it would be fine.

“Which is why I’ve been thinking.”

Rigel eyed me. “You are always thinking—or more correctly always scheming.”

“This isn’t a scheme,” I said.

“I will believe that when I hear what you’ve been thinking about.”

I smiled shakily and curled my toes into the cushions of my couch. I adjusted my bathrobe to cover my feet—mostly because I was trying to buy time rather than because I was actually feeling cold.

“We have a somewhat broken power balance. Previously, your being a feared assassin put you on an equal level to me—it gave you a certain amount of power over me, and you said bluntly you’d off me if I really screwed up. But that’s not the case anymore. You told me I won, so we don’t have that kind of balance.”

“We don’t need balance,” Rigel said.

I swallowed thickly and smiled. “That makes me really happy to hear, because I knew it means you trust me. But I didn’t really mean a balance of power between us per say, as much as a political balance of power. Because while you’re still feared, I think most people are convinced I’ve swindled you or something.”

“Leashed,” Rigel suggested.

I scowled. “Anyone who thinks that is an idiot. *Anyway*, the way others perceive the power balance between us is pretty messed up.”

Rigel shrugged. “I don’t care what others think.”

Again, my stomach did warm bellyflops that made me squirm. “I’m grateful for that, but I want us to have a fair relationship. I want you to be able to have the independence that I promised you’d have when we got married.”

I sucked in a deep breath.

*Here goes nothing...*

“Which is why I’d like to change your title from Consort to King.”

Rigel stared at me, giving me absolutely no feedback—spoken or physical. “Why?” he said finally.

I frowned. “I just told you why!”

“No, why do you care about keeping your promise? It wasn’t a vow sealed by magic. You don’t *have* to keep it.” Rigel said.

*Sure, that’s the part he’s questioning. I love it when the guy I’m in love with thinks I’m sketchy.*

“I’d like to think I’m honorable enough that promises mean something to me and don’t exist just to take advantage of,” I said. “But I don’t think that’s what you’re after, so allow me a moment to remind you that I love you. I want to be fair to you, and I don’t want you to ever feel like you’re under my control. And, if I’m being wholly honest, I’m hoping *you* might be able to foster a relationship with our realm and save it. So. Be a King.” I rearranged my bathrobe because it gave me something to do so I didn’t have to look into Rigel’s too perceptive eyes.

“No,” he announced.

He eased down into the spot next to me on the couch, but I was still processing what he’d said.

“No?” I echoed.

“No.”

“But you just—a Consort can’t—*what?*” I twisted on the couch and leaned up against the armrest so I could scowl at him.

“Are you saying I can’t refuse?” Rigel asked.

“No.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I thought really long and hard about this and it took you two seconds before you refused!” I complained.

A slight smile twitched across Rigel’s lips. “Your objection, then, is that I’m not sufficiently grateful for your gift?”

“*No!* Maybe...yes,” I admitted.

Rigel’s smile grew the tiniest bit. “In that case, allow me to express my thanks. You obviously thought about this. But I have no thirst for power. I am happier being the bogie man whose presence threatens the less scrupulous into obedience.”

“But you became an assassin to elevate yourself above the political games. Being King would make you untouchable,” I pointed out.