

ASH OF THE FAE

MODERN FAE BOOK 5

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THE thick wooden beams that spanned the infirmary ceiling made a beautiful cage overhead, but I was long past sick of staring at them. I rolled over, wincing only slightly in response to the ache of my still-healing ribs. My phone lay faceup on the small table next to my cot. The screen displayed the day and the time along with that annoying “no service” message that might as well have read, *Too bad about your career, Hannah.*

It had been six days since my last vlog. I knew this because my phone said it was Thursday, and for the past three years, I had been posting a new Fashion Friday video every week without fail. If the Faerie Queen didn’t agree to let me out of her infirmary today, I was going to miss a week.

My followers would think I’d completely flaked. I’d already missed my chance to post the last few teaser videos I’d planned leading up to Morgan’s annual Start the Summer weekend bash. After years of attending as Morgan’s best friend, this year, she’d given me the coveted position of ex-

clusive social media manager. I'd been planning for months. But that was before I found out that the person I'd thought was my best friend had been keeping a major secret from me. Not to mention the part where she nearly killed me.

Regardless, I'd seen social media icon after icon launch their career off the exclusive access to Morgan's annual party, and I was not about to miss my opportunity to do the same. I shot a glance at the tall Fae guard standing with their back to me by the door and considered my mental list of possible distractions searching for anything that might keep the guard occupied long enough for me to escape. There wasn't much I could do with my water magic, so it was a short list. I'd considered flooding the place, but that seemed too obvious. A mysterious drip from the ceiling might send the guard looking for a bucket, or someone to repair the leak. But there was always the chance that they just had the magic to counter whatever I attempted. It didn't seem worth the risk.

Besides, I didn't even know how to get home. I wasn't even really sure where I was, exactly. All I knew was that the Fae lived somewhere in England. Assuming I could find a way out, there was no chance of catching a flight back to Seattle. I didn't even have my passport with me. It's not like I expected to be whisked off to the Fae Forest after my former best friend accidentally hit me with a blast of magic.

At least, I hoped it was an accident. My fingers traveled to the tender skin on the back of my scalp and what was left of the lump. It would be a lot easier to believe that Morgan hadn't been trying to hurt me if I hadn't also been knocked out earlier that same day while helping Max, Angie, and Jayden with a secret project at the Silicon Moon offices. I still couldn't remember exactly what happened, but Morgan was one of only a few people who had access to the building and

the motivation to keep me from getting in her way.

I closed my eyes against the warning pricks of tears I refused to shed.

What a mess. Once I got out of here, I'd deal with Morgan. She owed me more than an apology. Using her party to advance my career seemed like a good place to start getting even for the pain she'd caused.

Crying wouldn't help anything, anyway. It would only make my already wrecked skin get all puffy and blotchy. The Fae infirmary just wasn't properly supplied for mere humans who needed multistep skin-care routines to maintain a fraction of what came naturally to these effortlessly beautiful immortals.

Would it be too much to ask these Fae healers to restore my healthy glow before they released me? Sure, it would be embarrassing to be so admittedly vain, but it would save me having to book an emergency facial before the party this weekend. I made a mental note to ask Talie or Eira the next time they showed up to check on me. Until then, as long as I stayed calm, didn't start crying, and couldn't see how bad the damage was, I could fool myself into thinking that there was a chance I might be camera ready when they finally let me leave.

Gritting my teeth and mustering the reserves of my fortitude, I pushed myself up to a seated position so I wouldn't look like such a pathetic mess when Max arrived. I tried not to think about the fact that he'd been keeping secrets from me, too. He knew that his older sister was half demon.

At least he'd been making an effort to apologize. He'd come to visit me almost every day since I'd woken up. Sometimes he'd bring his fiancée, Angie, who was one of my top five favorite people in the world. And he'd promised me that

he would convince the Faerie Queen to let me go home once their healers said I had recovered from my injuries.

I expected him to walk through the door at any minute and give me some good news. The only way in and out was at the opposite end of the infirmary, which was basically a long, narrow building lined with cots sticking out into the single center aisle like gap-toothed teeth in the mouth of a grimace emoji. I'd been assigned to a bed near the far wall. At the moment, I was the only patient.

When I first woke up, I'd had a roommate across the aisle. He was a big Fae with lots of scars, like he'd seen more than a few battles. I never did see his face, only his bare back. He'd been curled up, facing away from me, and he didn't answer when I tried to talk to him.

When I woke up again, he wasn't there. Since then, a few patients had come and gone, but they'd all been kept at the opposite end, near the door. Now it was just me and the guard.

I stared at the door, willing Max to make an appearance. The guard turned toward me and raised an eyebrow. Perhaps staring wasn't the best option.

I pulled my knees up, hugging them to my chest. A stab of pain shot through my lower rib cage, and I cringed. Deciding that wasn't going to work, I released my grip on my legs and crossed them like a pretzel instead. Then I let my head fall back until it rested on the wall at the head of the bed. My eyes fluttered closed, and I might have drifted off for a moment.

"Hey, Hannah!"

My eyes snapped open, and I turned my head toward the door. Angie was walking down the aisle holding up a brown paper bag. There were a few blotches on the outside where something greasy must have seeped through.

My mouth started watering. "Is that what I think it is?"

Angie nodded. “We come bearing treats.”

I reached for the bag with greedy hands and peeked inside. The mound of plump, fried doughballs covered in powdered sugar made my mouth water. “Is this a celebration? Please tell me you got me these to celebrate my release back into the real world.”

Max walked up behind Angie and wrapped his arms around her waist. She glanced over her shoulder at him, and they exchanged a look.

My fingers crumpled the top of the paper bag, closing it. “Come on. Just tell me. Am I dying?”

Angie’s head swung toward me, her eyes wide. “No!”

Max scowled and shook his head. “Definitely not.”

“Then what’s the problem?” I glared at him, daring him to break the promise he’d made to me about getting me home today. “Spill.”

“Fiona hasn’t made a decision yet.” He released Angie and held up his hands as I opened my mouth to respond. “She wanted to wait and discuss it when her Court meets today. We’re going there next, but we wanted to come see you first. I promise we’ll come back with news as soon as it’s over.”

“Max...” I hesitated. I didn’t want to explain why I needed to be out today. Even though Max and I had been friends for nearly as long as I’d been friends with his sister, and he knew what my career meant to me, I couldn’t be sure he’d understand. I had, in fact, been hoping that he’d forgotten about Morgan’s Start the Summer bash. He avoided her Hollywood parties unless forced to attend. If I reminded him, after everything that happened, he might insist I stay away and probably tell Fiona to keep me here until it was over, just to be sure I didn’t go.

Max cringed. “I know. I know. It’s just... You don’t under-

stand how powerful Morgan is. She's always been barely able to control whatever magic is inside her, and now...if she's working with the demons...who knows what she's capable of."

"And I'm no match for her. That's what you're saying." My jaw clenched as I held my water magic in check. It would only prove Max's point if I let my emotions control me and geysers of water started erupting in the infirmary aisle.

"It's not that. It's just..." Max sighed. "Aside from my mother, I'm supposed to be the most powerful wizard in the Society, and *I'm* no match for Morgan, Hannah."

I tried to resist the urge to roll my eyes at Max's unjustified humility. He was nothing like me. He had control of two elements—something almost unheard of among humans—and both were more useful in a fight than my water magic. And he'd been taught to use them as soon as he'd shown an affinity, unlike me. Max and Morgan's mother was the head of the Wizard Society. Max's father was one of the wizards on the Council. My parents didn't even know they carried Fae blood, and they definitely had no idea that they'd passed that magical potential on to me. If it hadn't been for Morgan and her parents, I might never have realized I was a wizard, too. And I definitely wouldn't have figured out how to use my power.

What Max wasn't saying, but what he knew as well as I did, was that he could use his magic to protect himself against Morgan, if needed. Air and fire magic were both great for that sort of thing. Water magic, on the other hand... If Morgan tried to attack me again, what was I going to do, conjure up a wave and drench her?

I cringed and resorted to my backup reason for wanting to get home. "I get it, Max, but my agent probably thinks I'm

dead. As much as she doesn't want me to be the center of some scandal, if she doesn't hear from me soon, she's probably going to call the cops, or worse...my parents."

Max frowned. He didn't want to explain magic to my parents any more than I did. "Okay. Okay. I'll get you out of here."

Angie sat down on my cot and set her hand on my knee. "I could stay, if you want? Keep you company while Max goes and pleads your case?"

I glanced back and forth between them for a moment, considering her offer. It would be nice to hang out with someone besides the infirmary guard who never spoke to me. But then I remembered Angie's superpower. She might be a human with no magic, but she was a lawyer and she'd always been way better at negotiations than Max.

I shook my head. "No. Go with Max. Leave me here with my consolation beignets. Just promise me that you won't let him take no for an answer. I am leaving here today. Got it?"

Angie grinned. "Got it."

Max groaned. "You can't promise her that."

Angie winked at me. "Don't worry. I've got this."

"Thank you." I clutched the paper bag to my chest, careful not to squish the contents as I watched them leave.

WITH Damir's return to the Fae forest, I'd lost my seat at the High Table. It had always been temporary. I didn't belong here. My place was back in the Dragon Fae clan's caverns, high in the mountains of Eastern Europe, at Damir's side, serving as his lieutenant and making sure the rest of the clan showed him all the respect he deserved as our new Alpha.

But Damir had arrived with Seren just before Fiona called

her Court to their seats at the stone table. There was barely time for him to greet me and ask how I was healing from the injuries I'd earned when I refused to swear an oath of loyalty to the previous clan Alpha.

At least I had good news to share on that front. "Talie says one more week and then I can try a transformation. He wants it to be supervised by him or one of the other Hands, but I think they worry too much. I feel great." I puffed out my chest in case he hadn't noticed that I'd barely lost a gram of muscle while he'd been off getting the clan sorted. Without anywhere to go or anything to do, I'd been getting in a lot of sparring practice with the Faerie Queen's Guard.

Damir nodded once. "Good. Depending on what Fiona has planned, I may have to stay here for a bit. If that's the case, I'd like to get you back to the caves to help Ivo. His strength has improved enough for him to take care of my day-to-day duties, but it will be a while before he's back in his dragon form, and I don't like leaving him alone with guards I don't know."

Our wing-mate had nearly died while challenging the previous Alpha of our clan, and it was my fault. I couldn't tell if Damir blamed me or not, but it didn't matter. If I'd kept my head down and held my temper in check, the previous Alpha would never have called me out. I wouldn't have been asked to swear my loyalty to the bastard who almost certainly killed my sire, I wouldn't have been nearly beaten to death for refusing, and Damir wouldn't have had to rescue me. I could have waited for Ivo to come around and agree to challenge for the title that should have been his. If I had, I would have been there to serve with Damir as Ivo's lieutenant. Damir wouldn't have had to protect Ivo alone.

The three of us should have been fighting side by side, the way we'd been taught by our sires since we were Fledgelings.

Instead, Ivo nearly died and Boro could have won, all because I'd been impatient and ended up stuck in some Forest Fae infirmary recovering from my injuries while my wing-mates faced an unfairly balanced challenge where they were outnumbered two to one.

Because of Ivo's injuries, Damir had to take on the role of clan Alpha. He'd made Ivo his first lieutenant in order to make sure that Ivo received the best care possible. As far as I knew, he had yet to take a second lieutenant. I hoped that meant he was planning to offer that position to me, but I worried that, since he hadn't said anything, he intended to offer it to someone he considered more dependable. I'd learned my lesson. I just needed a way to prove to Damir that he could trust me again.

I opened my mouth, the words waiting on my tongue, but Fiona called her Court to their seats before I could say anything.

Damir rested a hand on my shoulder. "We'll talk more after the meeting. Sit with Seren, for me?"

He motioned to the silver-eyed Fae who'd recently agreed to be his mate. She had been talking with the half demon I remembered from the only other Court meeting I'd attended. I'd failed to notice her approach. Either she was exceptionally sly or my skills as a lieutenant were extremely rusty.

"Of course." I dipped my head to him and signaled Seren to walk ahead of me toward the cluster of chairs that had been set at the far side of the High Table, just inside the stone circle.

Seren glanced back over her shoulder toward the table. I followed her gaze to the red-haired Fae who I remembered was the leader of the Elemental Faction. I'd forgotten her name, also. The dark-haired half demon was whispering

something in her ear. I wondered why Seren appeared to be so interested in their exchange.

Just as the red-haired Fae's eyes lifted to look in our direction, someone bumped into my shoulder and immediately apologized.

When I turned, I found myself staring at a human that I recognized, but not because she sat on Fiona's Court. There were only two humans on the Court. One had no magic but served as Fiona's ambassador to the humans. The other was a wizard.

My Fae senses confirmed that the human staring up at me didn't have any magic. That made it odd for her to have slipped past the border between the Fae and human lands, let alone be present at a meeting of the Faerie Queen's Court. And yet, I was sure I'd seen her somewhere before.

I squinted at her, trying to place her face. Perhaps she was one of the young human women from the village who I'd bedded? That might make things a bit awkward since I made a point to never visit the same woman twice.

The human smiled and stuck out her hand. "I'm Angie. Hannah's friend? We met briefly in the infirmary when I was visiting her?"

She paused, waiting for me to recognize her. When I didn't say anything, she added, "You told me to *give the bloke a chance*. Remember?" Her eyes skimmed past me and landed on the wizard who had joined Fiona's Court around the same time I began sitting in for Damir.

"Right. Angie." My fingers closed around hers as the memories clicked into place.

"You must be Ved Ashwing. You're one of the Dragon Fae, right? Max mentioned that you had joined Fiona's Court." She glanced over her shoulder at the table. "How come you're

sitting over here? Shouldn't you be at the table with the others?"

I forced a smile and hoped that it didn't look too much like a grimace. "No need. Our clan leader is here today. I only represent the Dragon Fae on his behalf."

"Oh." She turned her head to search out the unfamiliar face in the crowd. Once she found him, she returned her attention to me and gestured toward the chairs. "Mind if I sit with you, then?"

"Angie!" A petite woman came running toward us across the mossy clearing. "I'm so glad you're here!"

When the two women started to hug, I tried to escape. I was supposed to be keeping Seren company, not conversing with curious humans. I still wasn't sure why this Faerie Queen kept so many of them around. She fascinated me but refused every attempt I'd made at courting her, despite the fact that I'd promised her my seed. Of course, when I'd made that commitment, I'd been stuck in her infirmary, recovering with the help of her healers, and we'd thought my wing-mates, who also happened to be her cousins, might not survive their challenge and live long enough to produce the potential heirs they'd promised her.

I hadn't heard anything more about my promise since Damir had taken control of the Dragon Fae clan. I was beginning to suspect that Fiona had decided she didn't need to settle for my seed when she could have her pick from any of the eligible males in the Dragon Fae clan. As far as she was concerned, I was nothing more than Damir and Ivo's wing-mate. And if Damir chose someone else to serve as his second lieutenant, then I would truly be no one to her.

My pride refused to that happen. Not because I wanted her as my mate. She'd made it clear that she planned to have

lots of Faelings, and Fae males only carried one seed. That would mean she would have to carry Faelings from many sires. Dragon Fae weren't known for their ability to share, and I was no exception. If I ever took a mate—and I had no intention of doing so—she would be mine, as I would be hers, for life. And Dragon Fae lived a very long time. Which was why I wasn't inclined to settle for just one woman.

As though she'd read my thoughts, the only female who truly cared for me circled in the sky above the Court, then swooped down to land on my shoulder.

"Is that a faerie dragon?" The petite human stared at my familiar. She released Angie from their embrace and tugged on her arm to draw her attention to the small silver-and-purple-scaled dragon attempting to wrap herself around my neck like a fire-breathing scarf.

Angie lifted her hand and started to reach toward me but paused before completing the motion. "Can I touch him?"

"Her," I corrected. "Her name is Firrag. But don't reach out your hand like that unless you want to be bitten."

Fiona saved me from having to explain the best way to greet a faerie dragon. She cleared her throat and shot us a look that sent Angie and her friend scurrying for their seats. I sank into the last of the empty chairs next to Seren just as Fiona began to speak.

"Let's begin." A silence so complete that even the birdsong disappeared followed her statement and signaled that she had activated her wards. They cloaked the area, preventing the sound of our voices from escaping beyond the standing stones that circled us.

Firrag nipped at my ear and nudged my chin with the spikes on the top of her head, distracting me as Fiona asked for updates on preparations for the demon attack that, based on the

half demon's spying, they expected would happen during the summer solstice festivities. I reached up and scratched Firrag under her chin as Arabella reported on how Seren and the half demon—Nigel, that was his name, not that it mattered to me, I was going home and wouldn't be around long enough to care what happened to any of these Fae—were training the Queen's Guard to fight demons.

Seren exhaled when no one commented on Arabella's report. She started to relax back into her seat, but then Gwawr began to speak, and Seren shifted forward again.

"Are you okay?" I whispered to her.

She waved a hand and shushed me, so I shrugged and focused my attention on Firrag. It was nice not sitting at the table. I didn't have to pretend to be listening when I was seated with the guests. I let my mind drift to more important things.

I had almost decided on, exactly, what I would say to Damir after the meeting to convince him I was a worthy lieutenant when someone at the table mentioned my name. I searched the faces around the table, trying to determine who had spoken, just as a robed Fae seated at Fiona's left responded.

"Now is not the time to be deciding such things as who will sire the queen's firstborn. We must focus on defeating the demons, first. Thanks to you, Damir, there are now two possible paths to succession, should we lose our queen. And, should Fiona take a seed now, she would not be safely through the Settling phase of the pregnancy before the demon attack. She will need her magic to defend herself should the demons breach the guards."

Thanks to Damir? What did Damir do to help ensure that the Faerie Queen had an heir? I tried to focus and follow the discussion so I could figure out what the queen's aunt was talking about.

“Fiona could wait out the attack in the caverns,” Damir suggested. “The Dragon Fae would be honored to protect the Faerie Queen, especially if she is carrying the seed from one of ours.”

Fiona placed her hands flat on the stone table. “Enough. I will not run in the face of danger. I will stand and fight with the factions. Sorcha is right. The Court can vote on any candidates proposed to sire my firstborn after we win this war. Unless there is anything else to discuss...?”

I tensed, only just then realizing the political implications of the commitment I’d made. Fiona was talking about me, about the possibility of me being the male who might sire the firstborn of the queen. And, as I suspected, it didn’t sound like she was in a hurry to take me up on that promise. In fact, it didn’t sound like she wanted a Dragon Fae sire for her firstborn at all.

Fiona’s cousin, Arabella, was already carrying a Faeling, and so was their aunt, the robed woman who had spoken in favor of Fiona waiting to take a seed. But I’d heard that their aunt’s Faeling could not be queen. Something about the heir needing to be the firstborn female of the next generation. Their aunt’s Faeling would be Fiona’s cousin. Damir and Ivo’s cousin.

Wait. If Damir and Ivo were both High Fae, that meant if one of them produced a female Faeling, that Faeling could be the next Faerie Queen.

I glanced over at Seren. She was focused on whatever was happening at the stone table, so I allowed my eyes to drift down to her belly. If Seren were pregnant, why hadn’t Damir told me? Why did everyone else in the Court seem to know what Fiona’s aunt meant when I didn’t? Damir was my wing-mate. He should have said something. Unless I was right, and

he didn't trust me.

The voices at the stone table began arguing over the safety of some wizard who was healing in the infirmary. I attempted to block the noise out so that I could further consider what Damir and Seren's Faeling might mean for my future, and for the future of the Dragon Fae. Then the human without magic who was sitting near me stood and addressed the Queen's Court.

Angie. I was pretty sure she'd said her name was Angie.

"My queen, if you will allow me to speak on Hannah's behalf?" Probably-Angie bowed her head and paused until Fiona acknowledged her. "The hundreds of thousands of humans who watch Hannah's videos know nothing of the world of magic. Her parents are also blissfully unaware. Unlike Hannah, they never discovered and never learned to use the magic they carry in their blood. If Hannah does not return to the human lands soon and resume her normal activities, it will be noticed, and it will be nearly impossible to explain where she is and why."

She paused briefly before continuing. "I agree that Hannah's safety is at risk because she knows the location of Emilio's boxes. And it is very likely Morgan will try to contact Hannah as soon as she sees that Hannah has returned. Morgan is—was—Hannah's best friend. However, they do live thousands of miles apart. Hannah's apartment can be warded, and if she goes out, she can keep to public spaces filled with non-magical humans where Morgan is unlikely to harm her. If that is not enough, perhaps you can spare one of the guards and assign them to keep an eye on Hannah for at least a few days until we see how Morgan reacts?"

The corners of Fiona's mouth turned down. She glanced away from Angie and appeared to focus her attention on the

wizard at the opposite end of the table as though she planned to address him. To her right, Arabella, the commander of the Queen's Guard, moved her chin a fraction to the left before returning it to center. The slight shake would have been missed by anyone who wasn't watching closely. I had barely caught it, but Fiona must have noticed.

"Our guards cannot be spared." Fiona sighed. "If Hannah is released, it will fall on the wizards to protect her."

"But, Your Highness." The wizard at the end of the table leaned forward. "The wizards don't know about my sister, and I'm not sure we should risk telling them right now. It might divide our Society at a time when we need everyone focused on the true enemy. Focused on the goal of defeating the demons."

I glanced at the faces around the table, then up at Angie. Seren, who sat between us, moved one hand to rest on her belly. The gesture caught my eye, and I knew what I needed to do.

My mouth spoke before I could reconsider. "I'll do it. I'll guard the human."

It was time to prove my worth to Damir and to the queen. How hard could it be to keep one wizard safe from an un-trained half demon?

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