

SEREN'S SECRET

NOVELLA 2.5

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MODERN FAE SERIES

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To my nieces, who are still too young to read this, but who keep asking me if there are dragons in my stories.

Stumbling back across the border, into the Fae forest, I was almost too exhausted to care about the Elders' gossip whispered on the wind. Tracking the demon had taken longer than I'd expected, and my precious winter cloak had been splattered in incubus slime. But the demon was dead, the humans' daughter was safe from corruption, and I had a brace of rabbits to roast as partial payment.

Once my belly was full, I'd tend to my garments and rest. The news was just a distraction. One that shouldn't concern me.

So what if Cahal had resigned as our guardian? What did it matter to me that they were calling a Conclave of the Hands to determine who would take his place and become the next Guardian of the Elementals?

I wasn't an Elemental and Cahal was not my guardian. At least not according to the Elders or any of my kin. According to them, I was cursed. I'd been cast out. Left to survive or fade away, it didn't matter to them so long as I wasn't ever found returning to the Fae forest.

Unfortunately, the forest was the only place where I was safe from the demons. After decades of hunting them for humans

willing to trade with me for the service, there were more than a few that wanted me in chains. They didn't care that my magic was cursed. It would still feed them.

I hung the rabbits from a low branch while I collected fallen branches for a fire. After draining the water from them with my magic, I dug out the flint and steel I'd earned banishing a chaos demon who had been tormenting the residents of a nearby estate. Then I focused my frustration on the task of scraping metal against stone like a magicless mortal.

One. Two. Three strikes. Sparks I couldn't create with my bare hands scattered off the tip of the stone.

Four strikes. All because of that elusive fourth element I couldn't control.

Five strikes. If I had fire magic, I would also have blood magic and wouldn't have to suffer the stitches from that human healer.

Six strikes. One for each of the Hands of the Ancients who would compete in the Conclave. The Hands I'd trained with in crèche before being cast out. We were friends once. According to the winds, soon one of them would take Cahal's place as guardian. Would any of them care enough to change the rules that banished cast-outs like me?

The little bundle of tinder refused to ignite under the shower of my angry sparks. I shivered and started again. My knees were aching and my muscles cramped by the time the mound of fuel finally caught a spark.

I nudged the embers closer to the fallen branches and fed the blaze with my air magic. Only when I was certain that the fire would continue to burn did I return my attention to the rabbits. The point of my knife flashed in the firelight as I separated pelt from the muscle, organs from meat.

My future had also once been balanced on the point of a knife. Control of two Elements on one side. *Twintails*. Common among the Elemental Fae. Control of four on the other side. Four

that would open the key to the fifth. Blood magic that would have made me a competitor in this upcoming Conclave.

But no. I'd slipped off the edge, into the abyss, with control of only three elements. The fourth that never came. The third that couldn't remain hidden. Cast out. Hunting demons to protect humans who feared me but were desperate enough to trade.

Finished with the dirty work, I called water to cleanse my hands and my knife. Then I stood, roasting my dinner, staring into the flames, and aching. I twisted the wrist of my free hand until the palm faced up. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on the pain and channeled it to my empty hand, imagining heat. Fire. Flames.

When I opened my eyes, there was nothing but bare pink skin to show for the effort. I swore and a branch snapped behind me. I ignored it at first, assuming my exclamation had disturbed a fellow lonely forest creature. If not that, there was always the chance that one of the pixies was messing with me.

They loved to taunt me by imitating the scrape of flint against steel. They didn't need tools to make fire. They could accomplish the same spark with just a snap of their twig-like fingers. Not that they'd ever deign to help me.

After I was cast out of the Elemental faction, none of the other Fae factions would have anything to do with me. There was only one Elemental who ever came to search me out. I'd crossed paths with her before leaving the forest, but I didn't disturb her. From what I'd glimpsed, she was struggling with her own problems.

Turning my head, I expected to see empty forest. But, standing there at the edge of the flickering firelight, were two female Fae. I nearly dropped my dinner into the flames. Fat hissed in warning as it dripped from the carcass.

One of the pair I identified immediately. The other I recognized, but it took me a heartbeat before I remembered her name. Brianne. She was a Twintail Elemental who'd also been in crèche with me. Her recently shaved head must have been part of her

Queen's Guard initiation, which explained why she stood alongside of the second most powerful Fae in our realm.

"Commander." I stood so I could properly dip my head and curtsy while trying to keep the stick with my partially roasted rabbit balanced over the fire. When I straightened, I lifted my chin and locked my knees to keep them from trembling in the presence of the High Fae Commander of the Faerie Queen's Guard. Arabella of Rionach. Beloved cousin of the recently crowned Queen of the Fae.

"You're Seren Cursehand, correct?" she asked.

I winced at the surname. I'd once been Seren Twintail, until my affliction became impossible to hide. "I'd prefer just 'Seren,' if it's all the same to you."

"May I?" She held out her hand for the stick.

I handed it to her and watched as she crouched low and took over roasting my dinner. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity. Instead, I turned to look at Brianne and raised my eyebrows in silent question. She ignored me.

"I apologize for bothering you in the middle of dinner," Arabella said, pulling my attention back to her.

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked. A few moons past, a crop of nearly mature Elemental Faelings ran me out of my campsite in the middle of the night. I crossed the border to escape them and took shelter among the ancient ruins of the temple dedicated to the Lady of the Hunt. Now here was the Lady herself, expertly roasting my rabbit.

"How should I know?" she asked. "If you have, that's not why I'm here, and it's none of my business." She turned her head until her eyes met mine. The fire flashed in their reflection. "My spies tell me that you've been hunting demons."

"Is that a problem?"

She returned her eyes to the flames. "I trust you are a loyal subject of the crown?"

"I am." I had no issue with the Queen, only with my Elemental kin.

"Say it," Brianne prompted.

Arabella shot Brianne a look to quiet her but waited for my response.

"I am a loyal subject of the Faerie Queen, Fiona of Isleen, long may she reign." My words, accompanied by no sign of liar's pains, reassured the Commander.

"May the Ancients make it so." Arabella gestured toward the flat moss-covered stump behind me. "Sit. I have something I'd like to discuss with you."

"I'm perfectly comfortable—"

She silenced me with a gust of wind that forced me back and down. I plopped my arse onto the stump and folded my hands in my lap, gripping them tightly as I waited for her to speak again.

"Are you aware that your guardian has resigned and called a Conclave to select his successor?"

I wasn't sure if I should admit what I knew or remain silent. I couldn't lie, but agreeing would mean admitting that I'd been spying on my Elemental kin. "I believe the Elemental Elders would say that he's not my guardian."

Arabella nodded. "True. They likely would. Fools. But that's Liam's problem, not mine."

I blinked at her. "I'm sorry. I'm not sure I understand—"

"Never mind." She paused to rotate the rabbit, shifting it to a different angle above the flames. "I'm told that the favorite to win is named Gwawr. Gwawr of the Ancients."

A snort escaped before I could contain it. "Apologies, Commander."

"Did I say something amusing?" Her eyes flashed as her fist clenched around the roasting stick.

"No." I shook my head. "It's just that... Gwawr? Really? That's what you've heard? That she's the favorite to win the

Conclave?" I wanted to laugh. The Commander clearly didn't know what I did. She hadn't seen what I'd seen. Heard what I'd heard on the wind.

"According to your guardian, she is his star apprentice."

"That is true, but..." I hesitated. Gwawr's secrets were hers and not mine to share. She hadn't even trusted me with them. As far as I knew, she hadn't trusted anyone. I'd never have discovered what she was hiding if I hadn't happened onto her practicing with her fire magic, deep in the forest. She'd been so absorbed that she hadn't even heard me approach. I'd seen more than enough to know that she was struggling to control the same element I lacked, the one that made me a Cursehand while she was, at least according to Arabella, Cahal's favorite to win the Conclave.

"But?" Arabella prompted.

Something about the way she was looking at me made me cautious. "Why are you suddenly so interested in Gwawr?"

Arabella returned her attention to the roasting meat. Then, deciding it was done, she removed it from the fire and jabbed the end of the stick that she'd been holding into the ground. She stood, brushing her hands off on her leather trousers and glared down at me.

"The Conclave is expected to start in two days and will decide the next guardian. The guardian sits on the Queen's Council, representing the Elemental Fae. Since the Queen's safety is my highest priority, I want to be sure of every Fae with a seat at the Council's stone table. If Gwawr is Cahal's favorite, I want to know everything there is to know about her. If there is another who might defeat her, then I'd like you to spy on them for me as well."

"Spy? I'm no spy."

"Really? Are you so sure about that?" Her eyes narrowed in the firelight.

If she thought she'd get me to admit it that easily, she was mistaken. Commander of the Queen's Guard or not, my secrets

were what kept me alive. "You're asking me to spy on my own kin."

"By your admission, they don't claim you as kin, do they?" She paused to let that reminder sink in. Then she added, "But we would."

"We?" My breath caught on the word.

"The Queen's Guard."

I laughed. "You're joking."

"Brianne, am I, or am I not the Commander?" She asked her guard without taking her eyes off me.

Brianne replied, "You are, sir."

"And as Commander, I say who is or is not allowed to serve as one of the Queen's Guard. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, sir," she replied. I didn't have to turn to look at her to guess that she was standing at attention.

"So, who is going to stop me from taking you on as one of my guards, little cast-out?" She placed her hands on her hips.

My neck ached from looking up at her, and I didn't much appreciate being called a 'little cast-out,' so I stood to face her. "The Queen."

Arabella grinned. "Quite right. But I know my cousin, and I know her opinions on the practice of casting out Elementals. She may not be able to voice those opinions directly due to faction politics, but you can trust me when I say she will not mind me claiming you as one of our own."

I swallowed my shock at Arabella's assertions, but she'd lodged an unwanted sliver of hope in my heart, even though I knew that even our Queen would never be able to change the minds of the Elemental Elders. Rather than take Arabella's bait, I focused on the obvious flaw in her logic.

"The other guards might mind." My eyes cut toward Brianne.

Most of the Queen's Guard was composed of Elementals. Their distaste at serving alongside a cast-out would test even the

most loyal among them and likely put Arabella's command at risk.

"Let me worry about that," Arabella said. "The guard needs someone with your skills. Spy for me. Bring me useful information on all the candidates, but especially the favorite, whoever that may be. If you serve me well, I will repay you by initiating you into the guard, one way or another."

"Are you making me a deal?" The fact that she'd come to me, that she'd asked this of me, must have meant she was desperate.

"I am."

There was more at stake here than she was telling me. "Why?"

"Let's just say that I'd rather not leave the length and success of Fiona's reign entirely up to the Ancients."

With Edric and his Hunters gone, I'd thought all threats to the Fae had been eliminated. Unless she was referring to an internal threat. "You're worried that the Elemental Faction will push Queen Fiona aside and try to take over?"

There were only three High Fae remaining after centuries of attacks by the Wild Hunt. Four, now that Sorcha of Maeve, who they all thought had been killed, returned very much alive, and with a clutch of prisoners rescued from Edric's dungeons, including Gwawr.

But only one of those High Fae had taken a mate, and his mate was a human. There were no heirs to Queen Fiona's throne. There were whispers among the Elementals that it was only a matter of time before the High Fae were extinct and an Elemental took the iron crown.

Arabella tensed at my question. "Will you accept my offer or not?"

I reached for my knife, thankful that I'd taken the time to clean it after I'd used it to prepare my meal. With just a slight

press of the blade tip against the heel of my hand, blood began to drip into my open palm.

Arabella echoed my motion, using her own knife. Then she pressed her hand against mine.

“I accept your offer, Arabella of Rionach.”

She wiped her hand on her trousers and paced over to where Brianne waited at the edge of the clearing. “I’ll come to you, or send Brianne in my place, for a report after the first round of competition. Until and unless you succeed, no one else will know of our arrangement.”

“Yes, Commander.” The words had barely left my lips when the pair of them disappeared.

Once they were gone, I allowed my knees to go wobbly, and I plopped back down onto the stump. For several long minutes I stared into the flames, not once thinking about the gap in my power. My mind turned the deal I’d just made over and over, trying to anticipate the pitfalls and worrying that I’d just sold my only friend’s secrets to improve my own miserable life.

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Elizabeth Menozzi is an award-winning writer of science fiction and fantasy with romance. A former Midwestern girl, she currently resides on Orcas Island with her husband. In her spare time she is a competitive swimmer, reluctant runner, and devourer of books.



