

BEFORE

VENGEANCE

Chapter One

Serafina

Under the fading sun, I hurried past the palace square, keeping my shoulders slumped and my eyes downcast. To the conversing nobles in the vicinity, all they saw was a misfit. Someone looking to avoid trouble and attention.

The truth was, *I* was trying to avoid bringing attention to the trouble I might cause.

“Lady Serafina,” Alston, the royal butler, called from behind me.

I whirled around on the smooth, white marble floor. Alston balanced a jug of honey in each hand. The lower grade honey was intended as payments to the brownies for their housekeeping service.

I tried to concentrate on Alston’s words, and not the fact that the honey had been skimmed off the top by the butler.

Damn my keen sense of right and wrong, so utterly opposed to what everyone else on this plane considered normal.

“M’lady,” the imposing butler seemed disgusted with himself for having to address me. He didn’t even bother with a bow. “I’m to inform you that on the day of the Crossover, you’re to come to the South Tower before dawn.”

I nodded and started walking, hoping that would be all.

“One more thing,” Alston blocked my path, his eyes dropped to my neck with deep disapproval. “May I remind you to wear the Eye of Seville at all times. I cannot stress enough the importance of it.”

A couple of noble ladies close by snickered at me, their laughter rang across the square like bells. Their pixies, taking cue from their mistresses, zoomed right by my braid rather than keeping a respectable distance.

I swallowed, my fingers brushed against my bare neck of their own accord. The Eye of Seville was a long necklace with a bejeweled, egg-sized pendant. I hated wearing it. Not just because of its dead weight and sharp surface, but because of the mystery it represented.

In all my seventeen summers, I had never laid eyes on the Seville family heirloom. Now, I was suddenly expected to wear it all the time. Why? Did it have something to do with my birthday?

When Alston passed by me, one of the honey jugs brushed against my arm. As the glass made contact with my exposed skin, sensations exploded through my system. It was as though in that moment, I could feel the hardship of the brownies, thankless servants little better than slaves. I felt their every yawn, every sore muscle, and every blister.

A brownie would have to work all year long just to get a single jug of cheap honey. To have over a third of it taken away by someone in a position of power...

It wasn’t right.

The injustices they suffered crashed through me like a tidal wave, stealing my breath and

making my fists clench. But when the torrent of indignation passed, what was left in its place was a dead calm.

As I watched Alston's retreating back, a song rose in me like a long-forgotten nursery rhyme:

Honey, they say you never go bad.

Make an exception,

For he who made the brownies sad.

Before Alston reached the corner of the palace square, he doubled over with pain. He dropped the jugs and collapsed on the floor, curling into a fetal position. He groaned, his arrogant and formidable demeanor gone.

The jugs bounced off the marble floor and landed on a small wooden patio table nearby, without a crack to the glass or a single drop of honey spilling.

Somehow, I knew Alston was in for a long night of food poisoning, just like I knew the brownies, to whom the jugs belonged, would find the honey tasted twice as sweet as it normally would. I had no idea how I knew. I just did.

A crowd started to gather around the stricken man. A low murmur buzzed like bees amongst the pathetic sobs of the butler. The sounds shook me out of whatever trance I had been under, and my calmness evaporated in an instant. I left the scene with terror coursing through my veins, and I almost gave into the urge to break into a run.

Oh no, not again. What have I done?

For me, puberty had come and gone with my fae magic never making an appearance. I accepted that, along with the nasty whispers and dirty looks that came with being an Inadequate—a fae born without magical abilities. But in the past few months I could've sworn that I had come into some sort of power. Though if that were true, it wasn't like any magic I'd seen or heard of before.

In the beginning it was the little things. A merchant happened to break an antique vase in front of me after shortchanging a client. A violent fit of coughing befell a chambermaid as I listened to her spreading a juicy piece of gossip. Unlike regular fae magic, which gave one power over a specific *thing*, such as an element, my power seemed to be connected to a certain *event*—the existence of injustices. What happened just now supported that theory.

I shook my head. I couldn't have caused Alston to be sick. It had to be a happy coincidence that what happened to him was exactly what I'd wanted. I must've been desperate—I saw power in myself when there wasn't any.

A low horn blew, announcing the arrival of traders.

I stopped in my tracks and tilted my head to listen. The horn went on for quite a while, signaling a wide selection of goods available for trade. There would be offerings ranging from goblin jewelries and Ambrosian perfume to human computer gadgets, all poached from their respective planes as proudly bragged by the traders.

Stolen goods. Theft. More injustices.

Such delicious injustices. Begging to be addressed. Maybe I could get all those goods to turn to dust, or better yet, turn them against their sellers. Think of the irony of a pair of goblin earrings chasing after the traders and poking them on the behind...

No, I told the part of me that was itching to spring into action. I reminded myself where I was headed before Alston interrupted me.

There would always be unfairness. There would always be wrongs. For tonight, there was only one I sought to right.

Chapter Two

Eldon

As I walked through the palace ground in the warm early evening air, I could see that the preparations for the upcoming festivity were well under way.

Ingredients for the royal banquet were being brought into the Mirage Palace by the cartload, and the air was filled with the smell of salted meat, cheeses and spices. In the North Tower, Firwig, the Chief Elf and resident pyrotechnician, oversaw the loading of gunpowder into fireworks that promised to light up the entire land. At every corner of Dualsing, commoners' children eagerly bit into unicorn yogurt candies, a treat distributed in the queen's name. A taste of many more goodies to come.

It was a celebration where no detail was overlooked, yet the least important person involved was the birthday girl herself.

Reaching the stairs leading up to the Third Battlement, I stepped onto the dark landing and sent my senses out. When I was sure that I hadn't been followed, I began the long trek up the curving stone stairs, my defective right leg protesting every step of the way.

When I got to the top, I found Finny curled up in a crenel, watching the happenings on the palace grounds below as the last rays of sunset left the horizon. As always, the sight of her invoked a strong sense of protectiveness in me. Ironic, given she was whole and I was the one who was broken.

Bracing my hands on the coarse stone frame, I took a moment to get my bearings.

My heart skipped a beat when Finny spoke in a quiet voice. "The third step down."

"What?"

"The third step down is hollow. It gave you away."

Princes in general were not supposed to say words like "oops," or "dammit," let alone a crown prince in the fae kingdom of Dualsing. So I fired a question instead. "Why did you send for me? Is something wrong?"

As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized they sounded rather harsh. Last time we met, I told Finny I had to be out of touch for a while. There was so little time before the Crossover, and I needed every moment to set my game pieces in place or all would be lost.

I approached Finny as she got off the floor slowly. With large, solemn eyes, she looked at me for a long moment. When her eyes swept over my royal dress uniform, I stood a little taller, painfully conscious of the deformity of my leg that the rigid cut of my outfit was meant to hide.

"It's over, Eldon." She cupped my chin with her hand lightly, her touch soft as a feather, "It's high time I end this. Whatever *this* is."

She lowered her hand.

I was shocked. But really what did I expect after years of lying to her? "Finny, you know I hold you in the highest esteem."

I did. But until I could carry out my plan to secure the throne, to become more than the crown prince in name only, I couldn't protect her properly. Until then, it would be foolish to acknowledge our relationship. I glanced down at her neck. At least that accursed pendant wasn't there.

I wanted Finny, but I wanted the crown too. And I had a plan that could get me both.

"Finny—"

She winced as if I'd punched her. "Stop calling me Finny!"

I'd been calling her Finny since she was four and I was five. As children, we would hide

from the adults on this very battlement. We played chess, read books to each other, and puzzled over her family's coldness toward her. Then I turned sixteen and was let in on the Secret, the age-old ritual that would see Finny gone from my life once she reached adulthood.

That was why her eighteenth birthday celebration was called the Crossover. There would be no coming back from it. She had been kidnapped from her real parents when she was an infant. She was to stay in Dualsing until she turned eighteen, then she would leave. End of story. Meanwhile, she suffered endless I-know-something-you-don't-know snickers as everyone above the age of sixteen in our world was fully aware of her fate.

The day I was told the Secret was the day I started pulling away from her. At least publicly.

But our meetings on the battlement continued, under many layers of cloaking enchantments. And I started the long road to finding a way to prevent the Crossover from happening.

"Soon I'll be able to explain everything to you. I just need a little more time—"

"You've been saying that for a long time now. Enough is enough. You're ashamed of us, admit it."

I let out an exasperated sigh, though princes should never show weakness by sighing or becoming exasperated. I couldn't be honest with her. Her life, my crown, and everything else depended on it. I rubbed my face and sat down on the rough stone floor, my pristine, white outfit be damned. I patted the space next to me. "Sit with me. Please. We'll work through this."

Maybe I could stall her for another few weeks. By then I would be ready.

It was her turn to sigh. "Eldon, there's more than just *us* that is wrong. Everything else is, too, and you know it."

"All the more reason we should talk about it." I attempted a smile though I was panicking on the inside.

Tell me what you suspect. Tell me what you've already figured out. I need to know how close you are to the truth.

Something about my words caused a change in her. To my alarm, Finny started quivering, her thick, brown braid shaking in sync with the rest of her body. She took large gulping breaths as if she was having a hard time taking air into her lungs.

I jumped and grabbed her arm. "What's happened? What have they done to you?"

"Talk about it?" Finny gave an incredulous laugh that didn't sound like her at all, her eyes flashing. "What can we talk about? You're not only keeping *us* a secret from others, you're keeping things from *me* as well."

I bit my lip.

I realized too late that Finny was trembling with rage, not fear or sadness. I didn't even know she could get angry like that. She'd always been my sweet and gentle Serafina. I did not recognize this fierce and indignant young woman glaring daggers at me.

And it looked like she had only just started.

"You want to talk? Where shall we start? How about the fact that only today I was given the first piece of information about my own birthday celebration, and that was nothing more than an instruction about where to go the morning of? The planning for this began months ago."

Finny gestured to the palace grounds spread out before us. Servants bustled about, carrying wine and bedding for five hundred guests, blissfully unaware of the unfolding drama above. "In two weeks I'm to have a massive, nation-wide festival planned in my name, and no one will tell me what the celebration is truly about. Granted, I am the daughter of an earl, but there are more than two dozen earls in Dualsing and most of them have children. Why am I the only one getting this honor?"

“Finny,” I began, but didn’t know what else to say, and it looked like she didn’t expect me to go on.

“Even before I became an Inadequate, they didn’t like me. They never have. Not my parents. Not anyone else in this palace. I know that and I’ve accepted it. But this, this farce...why? Haven’t I already been enough of a laughing stock?”

How could I forget how Finny hated being the center of attention? All this pomp and circumstance was putting her on display like a show unicorn. I was too focused on what the humans called the endgame.

“None of this is about me,” she stated flatly. “If it was, someone would’ve gone through the full itinerary of the day with me already. If it was really about me, I would’ve gotten a visit from Madame Sutura by now.”

Finny was far too perceptive for her own good. It was true that everyone from the humble footman to the Lord Chamberlain had already had their measurements taken by the royal seamstress for the matching fineries prepared just for the occasion.

I could neither confirm nor deny her claim; all I could do was back up against the wall while Finny advanced on me. “Why, then? What’s going on? If it’s really about me,” her voice shook now, “why does Mother stall every time I ask her about the Trip?”

The Trip. A once-in-a-lifetime chance for Dualsingians to see the world, meant to be taken right after they became adults. Finny and I used to talk about taking ours together. Back before I knew that it would never be. I had turned eighteen almost a year ago, and had been making one excuse after another to delay it. I dared not take the Trip, afraid that they would send Finny away while I was gone.

“Well say something!” We were almost nose to nose now. “Or don’t. You won’t tell me the truth anyway.”

At first I thought the tightness in my throat was an involuntary response to the glimpse of fear I saw lurking behind the fury in her eyes, then, to my horror, I realized that I couldn’t breathe. An invisible fist held my windpipe in a death grip, and the air seethed with the presence of magic. Not fae power, but something darker.

And it was coming from Finny.

What did she say to me? *Well say something! Or don’t.*

With those fateful words she had unintentionally cut off my airway. She was no Inadequate, yet the power she’d come into wasn’t that of the fae.

Because *she* was not fae.

I opened my mouth but no sound came out. My body grew heavy.

Then I saw it.

With the next burst of her power, a pair of wings sprouted at her back. They were gray in color, covered in tiny scales that gave off a pearl-like luster in the dark.

Definitely not fae wings.

Two words echoed in my head as my world turned dark.

Vengeance demon.

Chapter Three

Serafina

One moment I was yelling at Eldon in a bitter tone I couldn't even recognize myself, the next he was turning blue right before my eyes.

Oh no, no! Did I do that? All the pent-up rage and frustration was turning me into a bag of explosives, all it took was getting a little worked up to have an outburst.

I pillowed his head with my arm just before he hit the floor. His fingers, clawing at his throat to no avail, started to sag. Out of pure instinct, I placed my hands over them and searched within myself for the power to push air into his lungs.

But he's toying with you. The part of me that was refusing to relinquish the control of his airways fumed.

Let go. Now! I pushed aside my *other* voice and forced Eldon's chest to rise, then fall. Then rise and fall again.

He coughed and spit like a drowning man rescued.

"Finny." He opened his eyes but his voice was weak.

I shifted his head onto my lap, anger at him temporarily abated. Almost accidentally killing someone had a way of making one feeling more kindly toward them. I caressed his hair, not wanting this moment to pass, but knowing it had to for his sake.

I removed one of his cuff links and raised my arm to throw it into the air. Quick as lightning, Eldon grabbed hold of my hand.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"You know what I'm doing. Calling for help." In an emergency, the cuff links could be made to brighten and float in midair, serving the same beaconing function as a human flare gun.

I knew what calling for help meant. It meant having my new power discovered, for there was no question now that I did possess it. Every fiber in my being was telling me to keep it hidden, but Eldon's well-being came first. I might be hurt over his handling of our relationship, but I did love him. And he was on the floor because of me.

After pocketing his cuff links, Eldon reached for the corner of a crenel, using it to pull himself up. The rough stone tore at his sleeve. "I'm fine. Whatever it is, it's passed."

"But—"

"Don't worry about it. I skipped dinner. I'm a bit low on energy, and I fainted. That's all." He winked at me. "I am to drink with General Tok tonight. Can you blame me for not wanting to eat beforehand?"

I narrowed my eyes. I'd been lied to by Eldon enough to know when he was doing it again. The attempted joke. The forcefully cheerful wink. The purposeful omitting of his suffocation.

Under my stare, Eldon sighed, looking more exhausted than I'd ever seen him. "All right. I didn't just faint. You nearly killed me. You have an unfamiliar power with zero guidance on how to control it. You have a voice inside you telling you to turn into some kind of justice seeker. Is that closer to the truth?"

My mouth fell open.

"Finny..." He touched his forehead to mine. "The fact that I know all this and I'm still telling you to lie low, does it not mean something? Can you, please, please, ask me no more?"

In the end, it wasn't the shock of the confession that made me nod. It wasn't even the creepiness of having my fierce inner voice so accurately described. It was Eldon's face—the

dark purple blotches staining the skin beneath his eyes. I could see them plainly now since he'd dropped his glamour at the same time he'd dropped his act.

We looked at each other, not sure what to say. Then we spoke at the same time.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper," I said.

"I'm sorry I lied to you," he said.

But he was still lying. I intended to find out more, but right now I didn't want to fight with him.

I knew deep down that our time on the battlement was coming to an end.

Eldon conjured an orb of pure energy on his palm and pulled bright blue lines out of it as if it was a ball of yarn. With a snap of his fingers, the lines rearranged themselves into a checkerboard pattern, hovering just above the floor. Next came the semi-transparent game pieces in the shapes of pawns, bishops, knights, rooks, kings, and queens.

Pure, undiluted energy had always been his power.

"You wanna play?" He struggled out of his tailcoat, the process made difficult by sitting and by its ridiculous length. Tossing it aside, he rolled up the sleeves of his white dress shirt.

Reluctantly, I smiled. "What about General Tok?"

"He can wait."

