

Dragons, Briars & Blades

by Emily Michel

Chapter 1

ALL OF EBON'S BEST ADVENTURES started in the library. It seemed fitting his fairy tale did, too.

He ran his finger along the spines of the books, taking comfort in their familiarity, though the titles were nothing like the ones at home. Eyes had been watching him since he stepped into the Faerie library and bored into his back.

Ebon tried to spot the interloper out of the corner of his eye, but whoever it was remained hidden. The gaze was neither malevolent nor welcoming, merely...curious.

"I know you're there," he said to the books.

Silence greeted him.

Some fairies were shy around humans. Not many, not since long before his grandparents' time, but some. Perhaps this was one, and he'd interrupted their precious library visit.

"I apologize for disturbing you." Other fairies were particular about manners.

Still silence.

He opened his mouth to offer another platitude, never forgetting his place as a guest at the Faerie Court, but steady, light footfalls on the stairs outside had him snapping it shut, a wide grin forming.

His sister Betony swept through the library's open entryway, her green split skirts swirling like a grassy meadow on a windy day. Her unnaturally bright green eyes scanned the room and an answering grin formed on her lips as her gaze lit on Ebon.

"There you are!"

"Where else did you expect to find me?"

She rushed to him and threw her arms around him, humming in delight.

A chattering noise erupted from the top of the shelves, and a magpie swooped down so close Ebon swore he felt the brush of the iridescent black wings. The white-bodied, black-headed bird soared out the open window, scolding them the entire way, and disappeared into the distance.

Bet burst into laughter. “For a moment, I thought you’d upset a pixie.”

Ebon didn’t know whether to be relieved or worried it had only been a magpie. The gaze that had pierced his awareness was too intelligent to be merely a bird.

Pushing aside his doubts, he planted a kiss on Bet’s cranberry-colored curls, a gift from a fairy ancestor. “It’s been too long.”

She swatted him playfully on the arm. It hurt more than one would expect from a young woman who looked much like a pixie herself in stature, though her mannerisms and dress spoke of her courtly upbringing rather than the wild forest.

“And whose fault is that, Eb?”

“The Winter Queen,” he said, his smile still firmly in place. It was good to see his baby sister after all these months. “The snow was hip deep along the road until two weeks ago.”

“You know she does not actually control the winter weather.” Betony hooked her arm through his and dragged him to a settee next to the open window.

The spring breeze held a chill, but the soft scents of the forest and the meadow filled the library, all earth and green and sweetness. The winter had been particularly long and harsh, and tradition was to blame it on the Winter Queen. He’d long known her influence on large weather patterns was minimal at best.

Ebon sat but Bet refused to let go of his hand. He’d last visited shortly before the winter solstice, but the roads had been near impassable since then.

“It was a joke.” The Queens could only affect the weather close to home and only enough to mitigate the worst of a potential disaster. “And the only pixie I upset was Towhee. She was none too pleased at having to escort me through the Argent Forest with no notice.”

She laughed, a tinkling musical noise Ebon had dearly missed. “Oh, Ebon, I missed you. How is Rane?”

“Still pissed at our godmother for not letting her travel.”

The babe wasn’t due for a few more months, but long tradition held that travel was ill-advised for a royal after quickening. Nothing was guaranteed to antagonize the Crown Princess

of Lorea quite like being told she couldn't do something. Never mind the potential consequences to the line of succession if the child should be born outside the realm's borders.

"And Nevar?"

"Doing his best to keep our sister distracted." His brother-in-law had the patience of a grimalkin waiting for a mouse to poke its nose out, but even he needed a break sometimes.

"Here, Rane wanted me to deliver this to you personally."

Ebon pulled out a letter, sealed with Rane's royal crest surrounded by a handwritten heart. Betony snatched it from him and held it to her chest. Five years ago, she'd made Neraida, the capital of Faerie, her home and learned to control her budding gifts. Betony had blossomed under the care of the Queens and the Faerie Court. She only made it home for an annual visit, usually near the autumn equinox, returning to Neraida for the winter solstice. The rest of the year, Ebon and Rane took turns traveling to Faerie to visit her, their grandmother, and friends. With Rane's duties as crown princess, the advanced state of her pregnancy, and the harsh winter, the more frequent visits the sisters were used to hadn't happened this year.

"How are *you*, brother dear?"

He looked away. Bet's sharp gaze too often saw through his half-truths. He loved his sister—both his sisters—dearly, but they had their flaws. Rane's was her impulsiveness. And Bet's was her annoying fairy ability to see through lies.

"Couldn't be better." He put on his finest fake smile.

"Liar."

"I don't want to talk about it. I'm here. I'm ready to work on this celebration. Can we leave it alone?"

A gentle hand touched his cheek and applied just enough pressure to make him look at her. "Okay, but I'm here if you need to talk. Any time."

He lifted her hand off his cheek and gave it a squeeze. "I know. And I will." *Eventually.*

"Enough moping, on both our parts. Since you managed to arrive when Gran is off gathering early herbs, let me take you to your room."

She tugged him off the settee. For a delicately built woman, she was inordinately strong. But she was fae after all, a human born with the powers of her distant fairy ancestors in addition to her unique hair color.

"When will she return?" He'd been looking forward to Gran's calm presence.

“Who knows? Probably a couple days.”

Bet dragged him through the stacks of books. Ebon had found an old favorite gathering dust on the shelf while waiting for the gossips to carry word of his arrival to his sister. He grabbed it as his sister led him past, then his satchel from where he dropped it inside the door. He'd left in a rush, packing only a few items within easy reach. Once his parents smoothed their ruffled feathers from his hasty departure, they'd send along his trunks filled with all the accouterments for his station.

He was perfectly capable of finding his room on his own. He'd been coming to Neraida annually since the summer after he turned thirteen, the same as his sisters. The same as generations of his family. The same as most aristocratic youth from Lorea since the treaty was signed a hundred years ago.

But he didn't want to be separated from his sister again so soon after their reunion. So, he allowed her to lead him through Neraida. This place was a second home, yet it often felt so foreign. The walls weren't stone, as they were in Avora, but living wood grown and carved from the immense white oaks deep in the heart of the Argent Forest.

He followed Betony out of the library, housed in a hollowed-out trunk of an ancient tree at least fifteen paces across and as tall as the highest tower in Avora. They marched across a small meadow, climbed some stairs deeper into the branches, and across pathways carved into the bark of the immense trees. Birds twittered and bees buzzed in the spring afternoon. Vines dripped down the trunks of the trees, some seeming to stretch for him as they passed.

They crossed the spaces between trees using elaborate hanging bridges, sung into being by those who wielded power over the giant oaks, and climbed further into the overstory. The leaves were still unfurling from their winter sleep, the radiant green slashing vibrantly against the brown and white branches. The forest floor was far below. A fall from this height would kill him, yet he'd been climbing these trees for so long, he held no fear. Plus, with so many fairies about and Bet's honed control over her powers, someone would surely catch him with magic long before he became an ugly splat on the ground.

They arrived at his room, the same one he'd occupied every summer for the past dozen or so years in the towering tree reserved for the Lorean royal family. This year, he'd come early as soon as the weather permitted. The hundredth anniversary of the Treaty of the Argent was approaching. The agreement had brought peace and prosperity to both Lorea and Faerie. He

was here to help plan the celebration, since Rane couldn't. At least, that was the reason he and Rane had concocted as she helped him sneak out of the castle two nights ago.

Bet pushed open the bark-covered doors with a grand flourish. "Here we are!"

He dropped the satchel at the end of a platform covered in a down duvet and placed the purloined book on the small writing desk on the far side of the chamber. Always familiar, yet always strange, he was in his home away from home.

He swept his gaze over the room to see if anything had changed. He pointed at the new tapestry hung above the bed.

"Did you make that?"

Bet beamed, as well she should. It was a gorgeous rendition of the view from his chambers in Avora looking out over the Argent Forest. The birch trees sparkled with silver thread, the road between the cities disappearing into the eerie depths of the forest, and the stony mountains in the distance seemed sharp enough to cut him. A little piece of home here in Faerie.

"Do you like it?"

"It's perfect." He drew his sister in for a hug. "I really missed you, Bet."

His sister sniffed but couldn't keep the grin off her face. "Of course you did. I am very missable."

He let her go and strode to the window. Ebon pushed it open, allowing the scented breeze to freshen the room. Wrapped in the smell of the oak walls, the awakening earth, and the early blooms, he almost missed a streak of black and white sitting on a branch the next tree over.

"Is that bird yours, Bet? I swear it's the same one from the library."

His sister joined him at the window, instantly finding the bird. The magpie chattered at them and flew off, fading into the misty horizon. Betony's eyes narrowed and frowned.

"What?" he asked.

She poked her head out the window and searched the trees nearby. "I'm not sure. It didn't seem like a simple magpie."

Maybe they were imagining things. "What else could it be?"

Betony raised a finger, with a mischievous expression, "A pet"—another finger—"a shapeshifter"—yet another finger—"a figment of your imagination—"

He grabbed her hand to stop the counting of all the possible magical things the bird could be besides a bird.

“Fine. Point taken.”

She pulled her hand away. “Want to join me for dinner?”

“I need some rest. I’m meeting with the Queens first thing tomorrow.”

“I’ll have dinner sent up. Never meet a Queen of Faerie on an empty stomach or anything other than a full night’s rest.”

She hugged him once more and skipped out. Ebon stared out into the rapidly approaching dusk, wrapped in his past failure and hoping he could find a task, a purpose, maybe a person here in Faerie to distract him from his hurting heart. Some part of him gave into the irresistible urge to search for another flash of white and black.



Chapter 2

THE MAGPIE SOARED THROUGH THE trees of Neraida, avoiding any further interactions with humans or fairies. She banked through the branches until she escaped the giant oaks of the Faerie capital city. The birch trees that gave the Argent Forest its name spread far below her, other trees interspersed to give texture and diversity to the life-sustaining woods.

She caught the currents as the sun sank lower in the sky, blinding her as she flew straight west to the Calcolo Mountains. To home.

Had she been a normal magpie, it would have taken her half the night to return to the fortress named Errozar. Instead, she arrived as the last sliver of gold-tinged blue disappeared on the western horizon. Stars blanketed the velvet sky as the magpie swooped to the battlement of the fortress built into a tall cliff. The only ways in were flight and a narrow stairway guarded by a small gate.

As she landed, the magpie shimmered, the magic of the cliff fortress cutting the threads that changed her shape. Sparks of purple radiated out from her wingtips, tail, feet, and beak. In a bright flash of blue light, the bird vanished and was replaced by a young woman. She strode across the battlement and into a dark hall, her white-streaked black hair streaming in the breeze as the sparks fell behind her like discarded fibers.

Clad in black leathers over a black silk tunic, a pair of gleaming silver blades at her sides, she moved gracefully through the dimly lit halls. The fairy lights above her were few and far between, and strange shadows flickered against the walls. Most would find this frightening, but Sarsa was not most anything. Not most women, not most fairies. She'd toddled through these halls, had thrown a tantrum or two in the intersections of corridors, had kissed her first boy in an alcove.

Tonight was not a night for reminiscence. She had a report to make.

Sarsa knocked on the ancient oak door, carved from a branch of Neraidan oak. The fortress was sculpted at the bottom and the craftsman had made the wood seem stone. Dragons flew in the air above and almost seemed to move in the flickering fairy light.

“Come.” The voice was neither loud nor soft, neither warm nor cold. Only authoritative and brusque.

She walked in and closed the door behind her. A tall, muscular woman sat behind the elaborate desk. Her short umber hair seemed to suck in the light from the fairy lamps positioned on the desk and walls. She did not look up as Sarsa approached.

“Hello, Mother.”

This got the woman’s attention, and a slight scowl formed on her rectangular face. Her brassy brown irises reflected the light her hair absorbed.

“You’re supposed to be monitoring Neraida. This better be important. Since you are here on business, Sarsa, address me appropriately.”

Veitha’s balls, it was going to be rough going. She was still testy over Sarsa’s recent debacle of an assignment in Teruelle. “Of course, Lady Myna. I apologize. It was a long journey.”

“Out with it, girl.”

Despite the fact she had earned her Errozar blades nearly ten years ago, despite the fact she had dozens of successful missions under her belt, her mother still treated her like a newly minted spy fresh from training. But the lesson that stuck with her, had been beaten into her both figuratively and literally, was her duty to Faerie outweighed any other concerns. There was no place for emotions in spy craft. So Sarsa pushed down her resentment and proceeded with her report, ever the well-trained and obedient spy.

“Prince Ebon arrived this afternoon.”

Ebon of Lorea. She’d glimpsed him briefly once on his annual visit ten years ago as she’d been skulking about the Queens’ palace, practicing for her final test. He’d been gangly and shy, and so had she.

Ten years had done wonders. He was only a few fingers taller than Sarsa, but well-built with lithe muscles. His chestnut hair was either artfully tousled or benignly neglected, his beige skin pale after the long winter. But what struck her most were the darkling eyes twinkling in the light streaming through the window of the library. Evidence of his fairy ancestry, but otherwise totally, completely human. Ugh.

“And it took you this long to tell me?” Myna snapped. “Why did you not return immediately?”

Sarsa was tempted to snap an ill-considered remark—after all, night had only just fallen—but it wouldn’t help the situation. If there was anything she’d learned from her mother, it was how to hold her tongue.

“Since he was not expected until closer to the solstice, I considered it was more important to gather intelligence about his early arrival.”

“It is not your place to make those decisions. You should have informed me first.”

And had she done so, she would have been castigated for not finding out more. It was always so with her perfectionist mother. No matter how hard she tried, it seemed she was never enough.

Sarsa bowed her head in false penitence.

“Well, out with it. If you ignored protocol, *again*, at least tell me something interesting.” Myna tapped her fingers in an irritated cadence on the desk, smooth from centuries of Errozar’s lords and ladies. The many rings on her fingers glinted in the candlelight, bright silver and gold.

“Prince Ebon arrived with only a Sister of the Argent as companion. He went straight to the library and stayed there until Princess Betony found him. Then went to his room. He took a book with him, but I was unable to make out the title. He seemed...sad.”

Myna considered her for a moment, the tapping of her fingers becoming more rhythmic. Sarsa’s gaze was drawn to the gold ring inlaid with onyx five-petaled roses, which also seemed to absorb the light.

“Did he see you?”

Sarsa gulped, but her mother had a way of sussing out the truth. “Yes, twice, but I remained in my bird form. He has no reason to suspect anything.”

“Hmm.” Myna steepled her fingertips together and glanced at the stack of papers next to her. “I am woefully short of available agents at the moment. The uptick in raids on the coast has many of my best busy with more important matters. Just when we think we discover which godsforsaken Fuartiran chief is behind them, new evidence points in a different direction. Despite your many recent missteps, it seems you will have to watch the prince and gather what intelligence you can on why he made this sudden appearance so far ahead of the Solstice celebration. You will also be tasked with his safety.”

“But—”

“Are you questioning my orders?”

Myna’s voice was as cold as the deep winter, and her withering stare hollowed out a pit in Sarsa’s stomach.

“No, of course not. I apologize, I was merely surprised as protecting foreign emissaries usually falls under the palace guards’ purview.”

Her mother twisted the onyx ring, and Sarsa waited for her judgement. But none came. Relief left her weak in the knees.

“They are also busy with the raids and upcoming celebration. At times like these, we must all be alert and help where we may. There has not been a specific threat, yet we cannot afford any harm to come to the Prince of Lorea. We must act with an abundance of caution. A hundred years of peace must not be squandered, and those who wish to sow discord must not be given a chance. This is an easy assignment, Sarsa. Prove to me you are capable of monitoring the prince’s actions with the court and keeping him safe during his stay, and I can send you back into the field where you are needed once the Solstice celebration is over. Perhaps you’ll earn your own team to lead if the consequences of your failure have died down. But please exercise more subtlety.”

“It wasn’t my fault.” The words slipped from her mouth before she could stop them. They were true, but ill-advised. Myna didn’t tolerate excuses. It didn’t matter how many successful missions she’d completed—her one failure was all that mattered to the Lady of Errozar.

“Need I remind you the *only* reason you get this second chance is because you are my daughter? Fail, and I will take your blades and banish you from Errozar.”

Sarsa’s heart stopped for a moment. She knew her position was tenuous after her failure, but to leave Errozar... She’d known nothing else. Even though it was hardly the warm hearth and soft embraces many experienced, this was her home. She’d trained her entire life to be an Errozar spy and serve Faerie and the Queens. Take that away, and what would be left? Nothing.

“I understand,” she said in a subdued voice. “I am more than capable of handling a self-absorbed royal.”

Her mother considered her carefully, lips pursed and body tense. “Very well, return to Neraida tomorrow. Continue to use the cottage and report any *useful* information to me.”

She returned to her paperwork, dismissing Sarsa with her inattention. Sarsa slipped silently from the office, her hands trembling as the seriousness of the situation settled in. She pressed against the wall to catch her breath. What would she do if Myna kicked her out of Errozar? She’d spent her entire life here, built all her dreams upon being the best Errozar had ever trained. And she stood at the precipice of losing it all.

She could do this. It wasn't a difficult assignment. Her mother had done her a favor. All she had to do was see it through. With a final gulp of air, Sarsa took a lantern from the table in the hall and followed the stairs down.

The dim light was barely enough to keep her safe on the narrow walkway. Fortunately, she'd been running up and down these stairs her entire life and could do so in the dark, if pressed. This may be one of the last times she was granted the privilege, but she tried not to dwell on it.

Sarsa passed the floor to her room and followed a low tunnel at the bottom, the stone of the cliff a mere handspan above her head. About ten paces later, the tunnel fed into a vast cavern, the ceiling two stories above. The kitchen hearth was banked for the night, with a teakettle nearby for anyone craving a hot drink. A large cauldron sat on a tripod on the side of the coals, and shelves of vessels and cooking utensils lined the stone walls.

She barely took two steps in when a long, lithe reptile the size of a large house cat skittered across the floor on four legs. Its scales were a rosy gold and shimmered like mother-of-pearl, and its small wings were bright copper. The creature made chuffing noises and its muscular tail lashed back and forth as it launched itself at Sarsa. At least someone was happy to see her.

"Brumbull, who's a good boy?" She scratched under his chin and the chuffs turned to rumbles, like the purrs of a cat, but lower and almost menacing. Thin tendrils of smoke escaped his nostrils as he curled around her shoulders. "I missed you, too."

Cleanup from dinner was long past, and the bakers weren't yet at their work. A girl of about fourteen tended the fire, and an older man waited next to a set of bells. Should anyone require anything from the kitchen in the small hours, all they had to do was ring the bell and either the night cook or the fire tender would see what was needed and supply it.

The man rose as she entered, but Sarsa waved him to sit. She had lived in the kitchen servants' quarters until she was ten and felt more at home here than anywhere else in the fortress. Sarsa helped herself to a hunk of cheese, two slices of meat, a wizened apple, a roll, and a goblet of blackthorn wine before sitting next to the old man.

"It's been a while, Lady Sarsa."

She sipped at the wine, which paired very nicely with the nutty cheese. "Eider, how many times have I told you to call me Sarsa."

"The daughter of the Lady of Errozar deserves the title, too."

“You practically raised me. Why the formality? I’m not deserving of a title, and I’m far from walking in my mother’s footsteps.” More so now than ever before.

He scoffed. “There is only one Lady Myna, thank both the god and the goddess. And she made your status clear to all staff once you turned eighteen.”

“She isn’t here.”

Eider glanced around, a wry smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye. “Are you certain?”

Sarsa laughed, feeding the meat to Brumbull a piece at a time. “Fine, she *probably* isn’t here.”

Myna did not become the Queens’ spymaster as a mere courtesy. She had a rare gift for glamour and no small ability in transformation magic. She could make herself look like almost anyone and could transform into a few different animals. But not even the Lady of Errozar was immune to the fortress’s power to disrupt magic, and the likelihood she’d found some way to bypass that fact of life was small. Although her mother enjoyed keeping secrets, and she rarely shared them with her only child.

“How have you been after Teruelle?” Eider asked.

“Well enough. Busy with a new assignment. It seems I will be away for a while.”

Brum swallowed the last bite of meat and curled on Eider’s lap, allowing the head cook to stroke his back.

“Do you need me to watch Brumbull?”

“Not this time. He can be useful for once. Why are you on duty tonight? One of the perks of being head cook is not having night duty.” It had been years since she’d found Eider here this late at night.

He shrugged. “The assistant I trust most is off visiting her son, and another dropped a full tray on his toes and broke two of them. The healer says he needs to be off his feet for a couple of days. I didn’t have a chance to rejigger the schedule, so here I am.”

“You’re too kind, my friend.”

“No such thing.”

They sat in familiar silence until Sarsa finished her snack.

“I have a long journey ahead. I’d best get to bed.”

“Here, have this before you go.”

He pulled out her favorite sweet, a caramel, from a little cubby. She kissed his cheek before stuffing the sweet into her mouth.

“C’mon, Brum,” she mumbled while chewing.

The dragon opened an eye and sighed before reluctantly crawling off Eider’s lap and resuming his perch on Sarsa’s shoulders. She walked up the stairs to her room. Brumbull disentangled himself and coasted to the bed. He stared at her as she collapsed into the armchair tucked in a corner. The Lady of Errozar’s ultimatum rattled around her brain. She’d been able to forget it for a moment, but the seriousness of the situation lodged in her chest, making it hard to breathe.

“Why, Brum? Why does she blame me for bad luck? I can’t control where the baron decided to fuck his mistress. I do everything she asks.”

The dragon’s green eyes swirled lazily, and he cocked his head to the side as though listening. Besides Eider and Brumbull, Sarsa had no friends. Lady Myna insisted a true spy avoided all emotional entanglements. It was for the best—one never knew whose confidence might need to be betrayed for the good of Faerie, and duty always came first. Nobody, not even her daughter, was exempt from her demanding expectations.

“I know, I know. There’s no leeway when the fate of the realm is on the line. But a pat on the back every once in a while wouldn’t hurt either of us, would it?”

Certainly, no other parent would banish her daughter from her home over a single mistake.

Brum huffed out twin jets of smoke before curling up and closing his eyes, his barbed tail resting over his snout. Yeah, that was about all the hope she had for praise from her mother.

And yet, Sarsa had witnessed a thawing in Lady Myna’s icy disposition a time or two. Once, when she’d taken a dagger in the gut on an assignment, her mother had gone pale with fright over her life. Another time had been more subtle, a twitch to her eye when Sarsa had gifted her with a cutting of briar roses as a child.

Those two instances had Sarsa hungering for more. She’d worked hard, approaching every assigned task with her best effort. No matter how hard she worked, or how close to perfect the results were, her mother demanded more. Faerie depended on the protection Lady Myna offered, and she couldn’t be bothered with anything less than perfection.

This assignment would be easy. There was no direct threat to the celebration or the Lorean royal family. It was the Lady of Errozar's job to be cautious, and she'd delegated the responsibility to Sarsa.

"It can't be difficult to protect a mollycoddled prince. I'll work harder and eliminate any possibility of error."

How in the name of the Great Hunt was she going to accomplish that?

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