



RACHEL MORGAN

THE CHARMED LEAF LEGACY

# TEMPESTS & TEA LEAVES

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By Rachel Morgan

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*Regency romance meets cozy fae fantasy with a dash of Pride & Prejudice in this sparkling, no-spice tale of magical debuts, an enchanted tea house, and banter-filled romance.*

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# Chapter One



THERE WERE THREE THINGS EVERY MEMBER OF BLOOMHAVEN SOCIETY knew about The Charmed Leaf Tea House: it had a mind of its own, its gossip was fresher than its scones (and its scones were legendary), and its formidable proprietress and creator, Lady Rivenna Rowanwood, missed nothing that happened within its walls.

Lady Rivenna had learned long ago that the best way to maintain her position in society was to create a space where everyone came to her. The Charmed Leaf Tea House, with its enchanted walls, opinion-holding decor, and subtly shifting floor plan, had served that purpose admirably for decades. Even those who dismissed its magic found themselves drawn back day after day like dusk sprites to faelights.

Amid the swirl of excitement that marked the Season's first day, Rivenna reached up to subtly adjust one of the trailing vines that framed the tea house's elegant menu board. The plant preened under her touch, its leaves unfurling slightly. Rivenna was about to pull her hand away when her sharp eyes narrowed at the board's flowing script, where 'Honeyed Lavender Tarts' had been written as 'Honeyed Lavendar Tarts.' With a flick of her wrist and the barest whisper of magic, the letters adjusted themselves, the 'a' gracefully reforming as an 'e' while the rest of the lettering adjusted to maintain perfect spacing.

Rivenna pivoted on her heel, tucking away a stray strand of her otherwise perfectly arranged silver hair, and allowed herself a moment to absorb the morning's symphony of activity playing out across the tea house's main floor. With satisfaction, she watched as both the young and old of Bloomhaven's elite fae society fluttered through the doors, drawn by the promise of enchantment, gossip, and perfectly steeped tea. Magic sparkled in the air like dust motes caught in sunlight, and the constant lively chatter was as familiar to her as a favorite melody.

She released a contented sigh. All was right in her domain now that the Bloom Season had begun.

It was that most anticipated time of year, when the elite of the United Fae Isles returned from their sprawling country estates to present their sons and daughters to both society and to the High Lady herself. Those young fae lords and ladies whose powers had manifested over the past year would demonstrate their unique magic and watch it strengthen as the season progressed, all while hoping to secure an advantageous match before the Summer Solstice Ball.

The weeks ahead would be an intricate dance with Bloomhaven's families guiding—or, more accurately, pushing—their offspring through the steps of courtship and alliance-building. From her corner in The Charmed Leaf, Rivenna would watch it all unfold, consulting the tea leaves, listening to the whispers around her, and quietly meddling where she saw fit. She'd been looking forward to it all year.

Across the room, Rivenna spotted Mrs Spindlewood, her hostess, leading Lady Featherlock and her two daughters toward an empty area near the kitchen. That simply wouldn't do. She hastened across the room to intercept them before they could settle into their chairs.

"This way, ladies, if you please," she said smoothly, gliding past Mrs Spindlewood. "I believe you might prefer this lovely spot by the eastern window. The morning light is particularly enchanting there."

Lady Featherlock hesitated only briefly before nodding. "How thoughtful, thank you."

Rivenna's smile revealed nothing as she steered them toward a table conveniently situated beside Lord Emberdale and his sister. The young man had confided just that morning—within earshot of one of the tea house's more gossipy vines—that he found the eldest Featherlock daughter's newly manifested magic 'utterly captivating' and hoped to secure a dance with her at the Opening Ball.

The way his eyes widened and posture straightened as they approached confirmed Rivenna's instincts. "Lord Emberdale, what a pleasant surprise," Lady Featherlock exclaimed. "You remember my daughters, Elianora and Myrissa?"

As introductions flowed and cheeks flushed with carefully concealed excitement, Rivenna drifted away, weaving between the tables. She paused to straighten a perfectly straight flower arrangement, and then to adjust the hanging teapot that was already in precisely the right position, all the while keeping her ears attuned to the conversations flowing around her.

"He's impossibly handsome, of course," came a hushed voice from a corner table where three young ladies had gathered. "Those shoulders, and that jaw!"

"It's the fencing," one of her companions replied. "Or perhaps the swimming."

"The swimming, yes. I hear there is a large bathing pool inside the glasshouse at Rowanwood House."

"I believe so, yes. They say he swims daily. But he has all the charm of a frozen wasteland!"

Rivenna's fingers stilled on the picture frame she'd just moved to. The ladies could be speaking of none other than her eldest grandson, Jasvian.

"Casimira is utterly besotted with him," giggled the first voice. "She spent the entire ball the Rowanwoods hosted at their magnificent country estate this past winter trying to catch his eye."

"I simply appreciate quality," the third young lady—presumably Casimira—protested. "The Rowanwoods are the finest family in the United Fae Isles, and Lord Jasvian is as magnificent as he is wealthy."

Rivenna's lips pursed in consideration, a slight frown creasing her brow. Perhaps this season some brave soul might finally crack through Jasvian's forbidding exterior. For all his handsome features and impeccable manners, it was true that the man possessed the social warmth of an icebound fortress. She did hope, though, that whoever might capture his attention would be interested in more than just the Rowanwood fortune.

"He'd likely be the most tedious lover imaginable," the second voice continued with a snicker. "Can you picture it? 'I regret to inform you that your kissing technique is substandard. Please refer to the manual I've prepared, with diagrams arranged in alphabetical order.'"

The trio dissolved into muffled laughter as Rivenna flushed with both embarrassment and indignation. She certainly had no desire to contemplate that particular aspect of her grandson's life, but how dare these frivolous girls speak of him in such terms? The spoiled little chits wouldn't recognize quality if it—

The floorboard beneath the table suddenly shifted, rising a fraction of an inch on one side. The teacup before the offending gossip jerked on its saucer, sending a splash of liquid across the table.

"Oh!" the young lady yelped, jerking backward.

"How clumsy," Rivenna remarked as she passed their table, her voice honey-sweet. "Do be more careful, dear."

She continued on her way, feeling a ripple of satisfaction in the air around her as she aimed for her customary table in the corner. The small grouping of comfortable chairs there—dubbed the 'Crone's Corner' by the younger set who thought themselves terribly clever—afforded the best vantage point to observe the entire establishment. She settled into her seat, arranging her skirts just so, and surveyed her domain with quiet satisfaction.

Something tickled the back of one of her pointed ears, and she absently flicked the air near her neck. When the tickle persisted—on her shoulder this time—she twisted in her seat and found one of the vines stretching hopefully toward the bowl of dainty sugar cubes at the center of the table. "Oh, for goodness' sake, it's the first day of the season. Do try to show some

restraint.” But she snatched up a sugar cube anyway and tossed it over her shoulder.

The magical flora that adorned The Charmed Leaf’s walls had grown quite demanding over the decades, though Rivenna supposed that was partly her fault for indulging them. They rustled with satisfaction as they caught the treat, their leaves shimmering with hints of gold in the morning light that streamed through the windows. At least it kept the plants occupied for a few moments, distracting them from dropping petals onto the heads of those the tea house deemed most in need of humbling.

Rivenna settled into her seat once more and reached for the teacup sitting in front of her. Only the tea leaves remained, having formed a delicate pattern at the bottom and around the sides after she’d completed the usual ritual of swirling and turning the cup over earlier that morning.

This was her annual reading of Bloomhaven’s fortune. The cup had spent the night collecting dew drops from the magnificent elderfae tree that stood at the town’s center, which Rivenna had then used to brew tea at first light before carefully pouring most of the liquid onto the tree’s roots. Then she’d placed a protective charm over the cup to preserve the pattern until she could properly interpret it after the morning rush of the season’s first official day had passed.

Now she studied the arrangement of leaves, searching for meaning in the swirling patterns and hoping to get a sense of the upcoming season. But the message remained vague, as though the leaves were teasing her with half-formed shapes and elusive hints. She was just turning the teacup in an attempt to view the patterns from a different angle when a pink petal drifted down and landed at the bottom of the cup.

Rivenna lifted her sharp gaze toward the enchanted ceiling. Why she, the most skilled practitioner of the nearly forgotten art of tea leaf reading, should require a nudge from her own tea house was beyond her. Was it trying to let her know it disagreed with her interpretation? She returned her eyes to the teacup in her hands and discovered, with a start, that the petal had turned a pale cream color.



“Did I just hear the youngest Titterleaf requesting *liquid luck* in her tea?” Lady Amarind Thornhart swept up to the table, her arrival announced by the rustle of her flower-strewn skirts. She maneuvered her voluminous attire into a chair, bumping the table repeatedly in the process. “Rather desperate, wouldn’t you say?”

“She should know we don’t brew such nonsense in this establishment,” Rivenna said without looking up, her eyes still on the suspicious cream petal. She lifted it carefully between her thumb and forefinger, narrowing her eyes as she turned it this way and that. It had not only changed color but texture as well, having taken on the thin, crisp feel of paper.

She placed the petal on the table beside her saucer and peered into the teacup once more. Hopefully her protective charm had been enough to keep the pattern from being disturbed.

“Hm!” Amarind let out a most undignified snort. “And did you see that? Lord Bridgemere just tried to impress Lady Fawnwood by adding some silly sort of enchantment to her tea, and now it won’t stop refilling itself. It’s overflowing all over their table.”

Continuing to frown at her teacup, Rivenna murmured, “Yes, well, I do admire his commitment to lowering expectations early in the relationship.”

“True, but the *mess*—”

“Do not fret. I’m sure the kitchen pixies will be along shortly to clean it up.”

“What intrigues have I missed, my dears?” A breath of lilac-scented air heralded Lady Lycilla Whispermist’s presence. Her chair obligingly scooted out to welcome her and she sat, completing the trio of Bloomhaven’s most formidable matrons.

“Nothing too scandalous,” Amarind said, “though I do believe that’s a Brightcrest seated at the table beneath the hanging teapot.”

At that, Rivenna’s head snapped up. It couldn’t be. A Brightcrest wouldn’t *dare* to set foot in her tea house.

“Oh, my mistake,” Amarind said with a tinkling laugh that fooled absolutely no one.

Rivenna narrowed her eyes, finally focusing on her friend. The morning light caught the rich, dark cocoa of Amarind's skin, highlighting the elegant bone structure that had made her one of Bloomhaven's renowned beauties in her youth. "You did that on purpose."

"Well of course I did," Amarind said. "How else am I to obtain your attention?"

"*Not* by mentioning one of *them*."

"I bumped into your grandson on the way here," Lycilla said brightly to Rivenna in a clear attempt to break the tension. "Jasvian. He apologized, of course, but was otherwise as antisocial as ever, rushing off muttering something about getting back to his desk with barely a greeting." She patted the lower part of her elegantly arranged purple hair, ensuring not a strand had fallen out of place. "How will he ever find himself a wife if he doesn't stop for even a moment's pleasant conversation?"

"The mines have devoured his attention ever since Evrynd's passing," Rivenna said, sounding a little stiff. She understood the weight of responsibility her eldest grandson must feel, knowing he was now tasked with keeping the family lumyrite mines operating in perfect order.

"Oh, yes, of course. Forgive me." A shadow passed over Lycilla's normally serene features, and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat, a subtle reminder of the shared sorrow they all carried for Rivenna's late son.

"But Rivenna, my dear," Amarind said carefully, "are the lumyrite mines not dormant now for the duration of the Bloom Season? Do the miners not require their period of rest, and must the lumyrite deposits themselves not lie undisturbed for the prescribed interval? To allow—"

"Yes, yes," Rivenna interrupted, her annoyance growing. "Indeed that is so, but Jasvian has other matters that require his attention. The management of our various estates across the realm, accounts that have been neglected, correspondence that has piled up—all matters he was obliged to set aside while attending to the mines before the Bloom Season commenced."

“And how fares Rowanwood House since your family’s arrival?” Lycilla inquired delicately, her tone suggesting yet another clear attempt to steer the conversation toward calmer waters. “I understand they’ve only just settled in for the Season?”

With a weary sigh, Rivenna replied, “My family has scarcely been in town for five minutes, and already they plague me about taking on an apprentice. As if I haven’t managed perfectly well these past decades.”

“They plague you thus every Season,” Amarind observed.

“Indeed they do,” Rivenna agreed, her mouth tightening. “And I grow exceedingly weary of it. When the right person presents themselves, both the tea house and I shall know. Not a moment before and certainly not because my grandchildren deem it time.”

“Excuse me, my lady?” A polite voice interrupted them, and Rivenna’s gaze slid from Amarind to land on the girl with soft brown skin and wide hazel eyes. She held a tray in her hands, upon which sat several used teacups. “The first round.”

“Thank you, Lucie. Right here.” Rivenna slid the Bloomhaven teacup and saucer to one side and patted the empty space in front of her. Lucie set the tray down, then executed a swift curtsy before retreating.

“You still have that young *human* working for you?” Amarind hissed.

“Clearly, yes.” Rivenna’s gaze swept over the teacups, which Lucie would have discreetly collected from various patrons throughout the morning and magically labeled.

“Well, I’ve said it before, and I shall say it again: You never should have dismissed that charming Miss Sparkwater. While not from the most elevated circles, she at least hailed from a respectable, middle-class fae family. One truly cannot have *humans* meddling in matters of magic.”

“I trust Lucie implicitly,” Rivenna said serenely, picking up the first of the teacups. She read out the name. “Lady Emberlee Whispermist. I presume you’d like this one, Lycilla?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you.” Lycilla reached for the teacup her youngest granddaughter had used.

“She’s a *child*, Rivenna.”

“She’s eighteen and manifested months ago. She’s considered a young woman now, Amarind.”

“Not Emberlee! I’m speaking of that Miss Lucie Fields. That *human* child.”

“She’s fifteen. You were barely older than her when you manifested.”

“I was sixteen. But yes.” Amarind preened, momentarily distracted. “I did manifest uncommonly early, did I not?” Then her face fell back into its previous expression of distaste. “But that has nothing to do with this. The girl will obviously never manifest; she’s human. That’s beside the point. The point is—”

“She can learn basic magic, Amarind, like any other human. She has already begun to do so. How do you think she labeled the teacups for me?” Rivenna lifted the next cup, which still had purple lip stain on the rim. “Now. This one belongs to—”

“As I was saying, my point is—”

“Your point is that you harbor suspicions towards her, and you are, of course, entitled to hold such a view, erroneous though it may be. The only thing of import is that I *do* find her entirely trustworthy.”

On the tray in front of Rivenna, the remaining teacups rattled nervously in their saucers. “Hush,” Rivenna told them. “There’s nothing to be concerned about. Amarind and I are merely enjoying a trifling difference of opinion.”

Amarind huffed. “Well, *you* may find this exchange enjoyable. I, however—”

“Speaking of manifestations,” Lycilla interjected lightly, “has Rosavyn shown any signs yet?”

Rivenna kept her expression carefully neutral. Her granddaughter was already eighteen, and while Rivenna maintained complete faith that Rosavyn’s powers would manifest any day now, she couldn’t deny a small kernel of worry. “Not yet, but I’m not concerned.”

“Too late for this season though,” Amarind observed with what Rivenna considered unnecessary relish.

And indeed it was. None of Rivenna’s five grandchildren would be presented this year. Jasvian and Evryn, now twenty-four and twenty-two respectively, had debuted several seasons ago, while the twins, Kazrian and Aurelise, were only sixteen. Generally considered too young to manifest, though Amarind had been an exception to that norm.

“And by next season—” Amarind began.

“She will have manifested by next season,” Rivenna cut in. Rosavyn would be nineteen then. All young fae manifested by nineteen.

“Of course, of course.” Amarind’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Or perhaps the year after. Twenty years of age is the absolute latest.”

Rivenna lifted her chin and proclaimed, “Rosavyn will manifest precisely when the time is right, not a minute sooner or later.” Though hopefully not at age *twenty*, she added with a silent plea. Twenty would be considered shockingly late to manifest, though Rosavyn was a Rowanwood, so she would survive the scandal.

Amarind sniffed. “I suppose not everyone can be blessed with children who manifest early. Though I must say, it does make one wonder about the waning strength of certain ... *distinguished* bloodlines.”

Rivenna went still, her hand tightening around the teacup. Lycilla gasped softly. On the table, the sugar bowl tipped itself over and the dainty sugar cubes arranged themselves into the word RUDE.

“Oh, stop,” Amarind said, flicking the nearest sugar cube. It shot off the table and was expertly caught by the eagerly rustling leaves that reached out to snatch it from the air. “You know perfectly well that was said in jest. Now, forget those teacups for a moment. I have far more interesting news to share.” She leaned forward and paused, clearly savoring the moment. “About the carriages that arrived at the Starspun residence two nights ago.”

“Amarind, darling, am I to understand you are only just catching wind of this now? Bloomhaven has been abuzz with the news since yesterday.” Rivenna turned her attention back to the tray of teacups. She’d overheard

quite a bit of chatter about it in the tea house's kitchen yesterday, all the members of her staff as curious as the rest of Bloomhaven. The elder Lord and Lady Starspun hadn't left Bloomhaven in years, deciding some time ago, like Rivenna, to make the town their permanent home. Their daughter now resided at their country estate, while their son had apparently found himself a love match on one of the most distant of the United Fae Isles and hadn't returned to Bloomhaven in at least twenty years.

"Ah, but do you know *who* was in that carriage?" Amarind said.

"Well, one assumes it's their daughter. Here to visit her parents for the season, no doubt."

Amarind's smile grew positively feline. "Wrong. It's their son."

Rivenna pursed her lips before answering. "Unlikely. Errisen always did have adventure in his blood. He announced he wasn't looking back after his debut season, and, so far, this has proven to be true." And considering the scandal that had chased him out of Bloomhaven all those years ago, Rivenna didn't blame him for not returning.

"Well, I can confirm that he is indeed in town. I saw him myself at the marketplace this very morn."

"And what, pray tell, would he be doing there?"

Amarind shrugged. "That's no business of mine."

"Are we going to get to the rest of those teacups now?" Lycilla asked. She leaned forward with anticipation, and Rivenna knew she was just as eager to decipher the fortunes of the young lords and ladies who would grace the Opening Ball in a few days' time. After all, strategic meddling required foresight.

"Yes, the teacups are far more important at present," Rivenna said, lifting another cup from its saucer.

"More important than the return of one of the most distinguished—"

"I am yet to hear this news from anyone else," Rivenna interrupted firmly. "Forgive me, Amarind, but I will confirm, as I always do, before we discuss this further."

Rivenna's gaze slid across the tea house's main floor and landed on her private little alcove on the far side—a cozy space partially hidden from view by trailing plants, with a small round table and comfortable chair beside a window. Everyone believed it to be where she retreated to attend to the tea house's accounts and administrative matters, a logical assumption that she had never bothered to correct. In reality, it was the perfect sanctuary for gathering the whispers and secrets the tea house absorbed throughout the day.

“But first,” she said, returning her attention to her two friends, “let us read.”

Rivenna divided up the teacups—four for each of them. Without a word, they lifted their first cups in perfect synchronization. Their left hands moved in graceful circles, swirling the remaining liquid three times counterclockwise. Then, as one, they upturned the cups onto their saucers. Three breaths passed before they righted the cups again. They repeated this ritual until all twelve vessels sat before them, wet leaves clinging to porcelain in patterns waiting to be deciphered.

The reading of the leaves became their focus, with all three women leaning in to examine the delicate patterns, murmuring interpretations and predictions and occasionally swapping teacups for a second opinion on something. The gentle clinking of china and murmur of conversations swirled around them, unheeded, as they attempted to unravel the leaves' secrets.

Rivenna barely noticed the gentle chime of the door opening. The Charmed Leaf Tea House saw a constant stream of visitors on the first day of the season, after all. But then there appeared to be an odd dimming of the light that streamed through the windows, as if a cloud had slid across the sun. She lifted her gaze. No, it was the tea house itself causing the effect, making the usually clear glass take on a smoky tint.

Within moments, the usual chatter of the tea house had quieted to whispers. Rivenna turned toward the door, and—

Lord Errisen Starspun. Even after nearly two decades, she recognized him instantly. Like most fae, he had aged gracefully, though he must be about forty years of age by now. Yet something had changed. As a young lord, there had been a certain exuberance about him, where now there appeared only weariness.

Well, well. Amarind had indeed been right. How vexing to admit that her friend had outmaneuvered her in acquiring this piece of gossip first. Usually, Rivenna prided herself on being the initial recipient of any truly significant news in Bloomhaven.

Lord Errisen stepped aside, revealing the woman who'd been standing just behind him in the doorway. He looped his arm through hers, and—Oh. *Oh my.*

Rivenna's breath caught as all conversation in the tea house ceased entirely. Because the woman beside Lord Errisen was *human*. Completely, unmistakably human.

"He ... is that ... is that his *wife*?"

Lycilla's horrified whisper reached Rivenna's ears, but before Rivenna could answer, a young woman joined the couple in the doorway. She stumbled to a halt, as if she'd expected the three of them to keep moving and was taken by surprise when Lord Errisen reached out to catch her hand. Her lips parted to speak, but the words died on her tongue as she took in the silent tea house, every head turned in her direction, every pair of eyes fixed upon her.

"Oh. My. Stars," Amarind whispered.

For the girl bore not only the elegant nose all Starspuns had inherited for generations but also the dark, almond-shaped eyes and creamy complexion of the woman on Lord Starspun's arm. This was their *daughter*. A half-blood child of one of the oldest families in all the United Fae Isles.

In all her years of reading fortunes and mapping the intricate social web of Bloomhaven, Rivenna had never witnessed such a delicious disruption to the established order. She felt the tea house itself stir with curiosity, the



vines along the walls reaching out just a little further, the floorboards creaking ever so slightly as they shifted to better observe the newcomers.

Rivenna remained perfectly still, watching the girl, seeing again in her mind's eye the pattern of leaves she'd attempted to decipher, the meaning that had seemed so frustratingly vague. Yes, the leaves had whispered of change—but even they hadn't prepared Rivenna for the storm that had just walked through her door.

## Chapter Two



IRIS STARSPUN HAD NEVER SEEN A BUILDING BREATHE BEFORE, BUT THE Charmed Leaf Tea House seemed to inhale and exhale as she stepped inside. Delicate vines crept along the walls, occasionally reaching out to brush against patrons, flowers bloomed and faded along the wainscoting in rhythmic cycles, and the steam rising from teapots sitting on various tables around the room curled into momentary images before disappearing. The comforting aroma of baked goods and the earthy fragrance of exotic herbal teas created an atmosphere that felt both welcoming and magical. Under different circumstances, she might have found it delightful.

But circumstances being what they were—namely, that every fae eye in the establishment was fixed upon her family with varying degrees of horror and fascination—Iris found herself wishing the tea house was considerably less enchanting and considerably more prone to convenient sinkholes.

A young serving girl hurried past, an empty tray in her hands. Her perfectly round ears marked her as human, unlike Iris's own slightly pointed ones—not nearly as elegant as the graceful points of true fae, but enough to broadcast her mixed heritage to anyone who looked. The girl stepped swiftly out of the way as a fae woman in a pale green gown approached. The tea house's hostess, presumably. She welcomed the Starspuns with a strained smile and gestured for them to follow her.

As they walked deeper into the tea house, Iris wondered if the morning heat had made her light-headed. The interior seemed to stretch and expand around the table they were heading toward, as if the very walls were breathing outward to make room. It must be a trick of the light, the abrupt shift from the bright Bloomhaven morning to the tea house's interior. Or perhaps merely her imagination, heightened by the weight of a hundred stares. Yet even as they settled into their seats, a gentle brightening seemed to occur above them, like a faelight focused solely on their table.

Taking care to keep her chin up so as to appear unconcerned by the attention, Iris turned to her mother. "This is horrible," she whispered. "Why are we here? We should have remained at Starspun House until the Opening Ball."

Her mother forced a smile. "Your father thought it best to make our presence known early. Let the gossip run its course before the Opening Ball. Hopefully, by then, another scandal will have surfaced."

Well of course, if her *father* thought it best, then that was what they had to do. Iris exhaled slowly, longing for a time when her parents would engage in playful debate, her mother matching her father opinion for opinion instead of merely echoing his wishes.

"I doubt it," Iris murmured as conversation restarted around them and the strange light that had seemed to spotlight their table dimmed and disappeared. The glances in their direction didn't cease though. Back home, where the population was nearly equal parts human and fae, marriages between the races raised few eyebrows. Her parents' union, while not entirely commonplace, had been accepted with little more than passing interest.

But Bloomhaven was entirely the opposite. Here, the human families all belonged to the working class or lower, and her father had warned her that relations between the two races were still viewed with disdain by proper society. "There won't be another scandal to eclipse a half-human debutante," she added. "Not unless the High Lady herself elopes with a garden gnome."

“Iris.” Her father’s tone held a warning, though Iris could have sworn she caught a slight twitch at the corner of her mother’s mouth.

“You know I don’t want to be here,” Iris quietly reminded her father.

“I am well aware of this,” he answered in a low tone, “just as *you* are well aware that the Bloom Season is your only chance for a better future.”

“Father, I am your only heir. If I am to inherit everything you—”

“We will not speak of this again,” her father hissed. Iris flinched at his sharp tone, so unlike his usual measured demeanor. While her mother had grown quiet years ago, Iris had always enjoyed open discourse with her father, freely sharing her thoughts and feelings. But he’d been tense ever since their arrival in Bloomhaven. Even at dinner with her grandparents last night, her attempts at pleasant conversation had been met with uncomfortable silence and disapproving looks from everyone present.

Iris bit her tongue and refrained from saying what she truly felt: the Bloom Season was most certainly *not* her only chance for a better future. The whole notion of it had always struck her as ridiculous. That the fae elite would leave their sprawling country estates and travel from across the United Fae Isles just to parade their newly manifested offspring before society seemed the height of absurdity. They would dance and flatter, whisper behind silk fans, and engage in a ruthless game of matrimonial strategy as the Solstice Ball approached, the date after which betrothals were expected to be announced like battle victories.

Or so her father had always told her. Her father, who had never wished to return to Bloomhaven. Her father, who had suddenly changed his mind when Iris had surprised them all by manifesting. Only *then* had he explained to her that the Bloom Season was about magic as well. At the very heart of the United Fae Isles, Bloomhaven sat at the convergence of seven major ley lines, creating a wellspring of magical energy unmatched anywhere else in the realm. The concentration of raw power nurtured and strengthened newly manifested abilities—and would continue to do so right up until the Summer Solstice.