

THE LEGEND OF
CONSCIENCIA
A TOMORROWLAND TALE





CHAPTER 1

CONSCIENCIA

The dancer's hair and ribbons lifted on the breeze, each with a life of its own. The bands of ribbons at his wrists unspooled into the air. They were as fine as woven spider silk and stronger even than that, but unlike his hair, it was his anima that conjured and gave these manifest articles life.

"They're doing it again," Consciencia murmured through two brushes held crosswise between her teeth. She was watching one ribbon testing a spill of paint on her preparation table. It was getting itself stained blue.

"Sorry, Cia," the dancer said and patiently adjusted his pose back to the one she'd chosen.

The guilty ribbon retreated, twirling about and vanishing in a momentary puff of white sparks. A new, much more obedient ribbon

unfurled in its place. It proved the dancer's apology by finding the correct position and then vibrating like a piece of struck steel.

Consciencia smiled. Well, she would have smiled if she didn't have the brushes between her teeth. It was more of a grimace, with drool. "I'll go a bit faster," she said, standing back and looking critically at all the various swirls of ribbon.

Yes. They were good. They captured the essence of his kind of movement: powerful, dramatic, and sweeping. She was pleased. The whole image was good—the physical parts at least. She hadn't really looked deeply enough to put in the spirit aspects yet. She was saving that part for later, once the long, muscular limbs, elastic, athletic ... Where was she? Once the raw drama of his presence ... No. Once she'd captured the combination of grace and lethal ...

She bit down on her brushes. She had to get a grip. There was no point drooling over the dancer, literally or figuratively, when there was work to be done. Also, it was a cliché. It would be too stupid to swoon over a subject this way. Especially one so important, when her entire reputation as a soul portrait artist was on the line.

She set back to work and tried not to swoon over her subject. She loved to paint anyone, but he was especially easy on the eye. Her time spent with him had been a revelation so far. An awakening of sorts.

Galathyr, the Queen of Desire's favourite personal guard and dancer, was bent backwards over an old wine barrel and several cushions. They'd used these as a prop to hold him up while Consciencia furiously sketched in the lines, shadows, and light of the portrait. It was a step too far to expect him to do repeated backwards somersaults, they'd both agreed. Plus, her studio was small and didn't have the space for acrobatics.

She recalled—as she had recalled many times—the first time she saw him dance, when they’d met to decide on the pose. The enormous airs he was able to command above the ground with the effortless grace of an actual ribbon in flight begged to be captured. All that beauty was a heady cocktail to witness. Even when he was posed, yawning and struggling to focus as time passed in the warm little studio, Consciencia found herself staring at Galathyr without a thought about the painting.

Wait—he was yawning.

“You should take a break,” Consciencia said, spitting out the brushes and putting them down on her desk. She swiped up a rag and began to wipe her hands.

The big, elegant circles of artfully set silver-white hair and ribbons dropped out of the air and landed on the floorboards like wet washing. The ribbons vanished an instant later, as though they were glad to be out of it.

“Thank fate for that,” Galathyr said with feeling.

“You can move,” Consciencia said, because he hadn’t.

“In theory.” He walked his toes back in and began to fold at the hips out of the backbend. A series of hisses and curses flowed steadily out of him with each movement. “Why do they call it ‘sitting?’”

In order to portray the sense of movement, he’d been animating his own hair and weapons with enough anima flux that they kept their shape. His heavy mane of hair was long, down to his knees. The ribbons had no physical limits, Consciencia understood, but they were only visible when he was using them. All of that drew, as all Fae magic did, upon the spirit energy of the user. Recovery from prolonged use could only come through deep, restful sleep.

He curled back up to a standing position and rubbed his face. “That hurts. How long has it been?”

Consciencia shot a guilty glance at the Tideglass in the window. “It’s dinnertime, but you should definitely have a nap first. I’m so sorry. I didn’t realise how late it was. Please.” She gestured to the long couch, which was set in the bow window at the lighter end of the room. She usually read on it—or napped when she ran out of energy.

He was still working on easing his joints. “How many more times?”

“Oh, one more session will definitely be enough,” she said. “Then we can move on to the soul part. You can just sit for that. I mean sit on the couch. You don’t have to do anything.”

He ignored the couch. Instead he pulled all her cushions down onto the threadbare rug on the floor, stuck one in his arms, and curled up on the others in a foetal position—the direct opposite of the way he’d spent most of the Tide. He closed his eyes.

Consciencia walked over, then she sat down beside him in the soft, warm glow of the late-tidal light to see that he was all right. She should have stopped a while ago and given him more breaks. What must he think of her? Some kind of cold-hearted monstrosity, fixated on her art. She wanted to apologise, but she didn’t want to disturb him.

With her cleanest hand, she held on to the decorated bag that held her amulet. It was warm, almost hot, since it had been working so hard to protect her from the full energetic impact of being so close to a powerful Fae from another Province. Like all Fae, she kept her amulet on her at all times to help regulate her emotions. Here in Wonder, her home, she was usually at relative peace, despite her troubled early life. She shook her head—an involuntary attempt to shake off unwanted memories—and carefully took the amulet out of its bag.

The representation of Amutaz, surrounded on all sides by interlocking staircases, was hot. She held it tightly in her hand, willing it to dispel her feelings of desire.

Maybe it was too hot, she thought, dropping it back into the bag before it burned her. Maybe it had overheated. It felt a bit like it might melt soon. That would account for all her unsuitable thoughts and feelings. As if there were any real escape from them. But also, how could you trust them? It was only natural that the vibrational frequencies of one Province would be affected by Fae tuned in to another dimension of experience.

In her life, she hadn't given much thought or attention to Desire. This was probably why it affected her so much. She felt she was, on many levels, starving.

Could this be more than just desire?

She gazed at Galathyr, innocently sleeping, her own thoughts anything but innocent. Did he feel like this all the time about everything? That must be inconvenient. Or maybe he enjoyed it. Perhaps they all did, because it was natural to them, like fish in water. How did they decide if their feelings were special or just ordinary feelings? Did he feel desire for her the way she did for him? Did he find it insulting, because compared to the desire of a Desire Fae, hers would be like soggy bread? If she affected him the way he affected her, would he only see her in terms of wonder? She'd felt a certain kind of friendly interest, and they had shared a few longer than normal glances—which she'd ended awkwardly, and in what she hoped was a respectful way—but she wasn't sure. You could read other Fae quite wrongly. Experience had taught her that.

The amulet flared. She had to let go of it, worried the bag would catch fire.

“If you’re wondering whether or not what you’re feeling is real, it is,” Galathyr said without opening his eyes or otherwise moving. He yawned again. “When I’m less of a vegetable, I was wondering if you’d like to have dinner with me.”

Consciencia felt a smile start on her lips and spread throughout her entire being. Oh. Yes. “Dinner with a vegetable?”

“Less of a vegetable.”

“I like vegetables.”

“I thought you liked wood.”

“Brushes aren’t my whole diet.”

“Good. I don’t think I could manage more than one or two.”

A brush-sized tuft of his hair reached up and tickled her nose before it slumped down with the rest of the mane to the floor.

Now he was asleep.

She let some of her own anima, the very magic that sustained all Fae, flow into her sight and stole a glance at him. Sleeping Fae were less guarded than those awake, their minds drifting loose, their feelings rising to stretch and expand. She felt Galathyr’s energy reach out and merge with that of the great invisible Tide all around them as its all-encompassing magical energy flowed on the Ebb to the Heart of the World, bringing darkness across all six Provinces of their world, right to the edge of existence.

It was extremely difficult to paint what she saw in a way others could understand. She would choose symbols, images, colours, shapes, sometimes animals and materials, to try to grasp the truth of an individual’s spirit. It had been a long road of learning—more like mysticism than art, really, if she were honest. Even her previous career hadn’t prepared her for the complexities of seeing so deeply into another Fae. She’d been looking forward to discovering what

she could about the inner being of this Fae whose exterior she liked so much, hoping to use it to bring the essence of his soul—and what had so captured the Queen of Desire—to the portrait.

She closed her eyes so he didn't distract her and opened her imagination, allowing it to seek and find, powered by her unique spirit, which she willed to bring her a vision and show her something that would capture the uncatchable.

In her mind's eye, she saw Galathyr's spirit as though a butterfly, white and silver, opening its wings. It took flight, and dust fell, glittering, becoming shards of light. It brought a silvery light with it, and as it flew, it moved across the warm light that came with the Flow Tide. The combination of silver and gold was blinding. The rays of light became the petals of a flower, upon which the butterfly sat.

He was brilliant in the truest sense. A force of nature.

Her eyes snapped open.

For the first time in her life, she couldn't comprehend the sense of wonder she'd just experienced. Truly seeing him had changed something in her.

She sat back on her heels and put her hand to her mouth, looking at the sleeping dancer. The Queen could desire as much as she wanted, Galathyr was not something that could be held. Not even stilled. He was part of the essence of magic in the world. All Fae had some of it. But here it was, in its full form. She could behold it using her gift, though she didn't possess that kind of pure connection.

But she could love it, and perhaps it would show her a way to be something new.

She was falling in love. It was a true wonder—perhaps the first she'd experienced in her life. She finally understood.

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