

ENCHANTING  
THE  
FAE  
QUEEN



# 1

*In a palatial, centuries-old villa in the heart of Fiora,  
capital city of the Serafin Empire*

*Twenty-five years ago*

**G**erard de Moireul was eight years old when his grandmother summoned him to witness his parents' execution.

He didn't realize, at first, why the servants were bothering to wake him at all. It had been weeks since he'd been left at his grandmother's villa, and in all that time, he had never met her nor been attended in his room by any of her household staff. After the first long day without any food, he'd finally found his own way to the kitchens, where a grim-faced older man had grudgingly served him a breakfast of plain, un-buttered toast and a small clay cup of well water.

Under the judgmental gazes of all the kitchen staff, Gerard hadn't dared ask for any more, no matter how loudly his stomach rumbled. From then onwards, though, he'd made a shamefaced pilgrimage to the kitchen twice a day, eating his meager portions as swiftly as possible and trying to ignore the way the room went deafeningly silent every time he entered. He'd spent the rest of his hours wandering the long marble galleries, all of them lined with impressive busts and statues but devoid of human life.

He couldn't even look out through the windows at passersby, as every single pane of glass in the villa had been covered and sealed by immovable black silk curtains before his arrival.

When hard, impatient hands shook his shoulder early one morning and harsh voices demanded that he wake, his first, desperate hope was that his parents were finally back from whatever urgent trip had taken them from him for the past two weeks. He didn't argue when he was presented with bright white, ruffled clothes, the sort that might be worn for one of his mother's famously luxuriant parties, where Imperial archdukes and the Emperor himself often mingled as guests with scandalous opera singers and heroic generals.

Curly hair tamed by a ruthless comb and unfamiliar clothes stiff against his skin, he scrambled thankfully into the grand carriage with curtained windows that waited inside the villa's sheltered outer courtyard . . .

And then stumbled to a halt as he took in the apparition who waited for him there. Dark eyes glittered with fury in her pale, stretched-thin face. Giant ruby clips studded her white hair, and even more jewelry flashed on every patch of skin exposed by her low-cut, celebratory gown.

"*This*," his grandmother hissed, "is the price of weakness and treason. Keep your eyes open, show no sorrow, and *learn it well*, or I will end this shameful family line forever."

Gerard might not yet know about the scandal that had swept

the continent for weeks—the bribes accepted, the secrets sold to enemies of the Empire, the soldiers' lives lost in consequence—but even at eight years old, he could sense the deadly truth in his grandmother's hissed warning.

So he kept his eyes open through everything that followed. As the Emperor's own personal executioner read out the list of treasonous crimes that had been committed, the crowd bayed with ravenous hunger and rage, and his parents were beheaded in front of him.

Under his grandmother's icy gaze, he didn't dare shed a single tear.

By the time he returned with her to his new home, Gerard thought his head and heart were both completely numb. Then, the next day, he was woken once again—this time, to be sent away to a military academy where every student and teacher knew exactly who he was and what his parents had done.

Perhaps his grandmother hoped that his classmates would fulfil her own deepest wishes, so he would not survive to shame the family in his turn. But Gerard had listened and learned his lesson well.

He would never forget it.

He was twenty-two years of age when he found himself unexpectedly in charge of a full battalion. All three of his commanding officers had been shot, and he and his men were left boxed within a valley with no options for retreat. However, Gerard had spent years studying military history and strategy in the dusty academy library that had been his refuge when he was younger. He could see exactly how to turn this seeming trap into a bottleneck for their opponents—and the astonishing, turnaround victory achieved under his command was the first step in an inexorable progression.

By the time he was twenty-five years old, court gossips and newspaper reporters alike were calling him the Empire's Golden Beacon. Breathless reports crossed the continent—both within

and without the collected archduchies of the Serafin Empire—with news of his unstoppable triumphs in battle, paeans to the shining, golden hair that (according to one influential poet) symbolically *lit his men's way to victory*, and his relentless, ascetic self-control in every aspect of his life. By twenty-six, he was a multi-awarded general; at thirty years of age, he became the youngest ever high general of the Serafin Empire. He was appointed to the post by Emperor Otto II, son of the very same emperor who had attended Gerard's mother's parties and then decreed her bloody execution.

Now, as the Imperial high priest serenely wafted an incense burner over Gerard's head to signify the pantheon's blessing upon him as the Empire's chief defender and sword of justice, Gerard breathed in the heady scent and gazed across the packed audience of clapping royals, aristocrats, military officers, and newspaper journalists.

No matter how desperately they tried, none of those gathered reporters or court gossips had ever managed to attach a single scandal to his name.

They never would.

His grandmother was no longer alive to witness the event, but he could still hear the last words she had uttered when he'd attended her final bedside ten years earlier.

"It's up to you now," she'd rasped, her dark eyes as fierce and as furious as ever despite the physical agony wracking her body. "You're all that's left of our family line. *Make it matter.*"

He fully intended to . . . no matter how provoking, dangerous, and unsettling the nemesis who had chosen to plant herself in his path, doing her reckless best to ruin everything.