

Chapter 7: Secrets of the Estate

I stood motionless for a moment, watching as Tamlin disappeared back into the house, his words lingering in the air between us. His warning about the blight affecting the land was meant to deter me, yet it only deepened my curiosity. As Chapter 7 unfolds, the vast expanse of the estate stretched before me, its carefully tended gardens and untamed wilderness merging at the edges, forming a boundary I was certain held more than just flora and fauna.

Even if escape was impossible, I needed to understand the place that now held me captive. The warm breeze carried the scent of citrus and damp earth, an oddly pleasant combination, though it did little to settle my nerves. Alis had been adamant that the grounds were not as safe as they appeared, and though I had no doubt that hidden dangers lurked in the shadows, I refused to be a caged bird waiting for someone else to determine my fate.

I moved forward cautiously, stepping off the stone steps and onto the soft grass that rolled out like an endless sea of green. The gardens, meticulously arranged near the manor, soon gave way to untamed growth, where wildflowers thrived in chaotic bursts of color, and towering trees loomed like silent sentinels. A river cut through the estate in the distance, its surface glinting under the afternoon sun, and I wondered if it marked the edge of Tamlin's domain or if the estate sprawled even further into the unknown.

Despite the beauty, there was something unsettling about the stillness, as if the land itself was holding its breath. Birds flitted between tree branches, their melodies cheerful but restrained, as though they too understood that something unnatural had begun to seep into the heart of this world. I resisted the urge to glance over my shoulder, unwilling to admit that my own presence here felt as intrusive as the blight Tamlin had spoken of.

I kept moving, marking every turn, every change in the terrain, as if mapping the estate in my mind would somehow grant me an advantage. The more I walked, the more I noticed the subtle shifts in the landscape—the perfectly shaped hedges that seemed untouched by time, the statues of creatures I didn't recognize, carved from stone so lifelike they looked ready to step forward at any moment. Some bore cracks, their surfaces marred as though something had tried to claw its way out from within.

A rustling sound came from beyond the nearest hedge, and my body tensed instinctively. My hand moved to my belt, though I had no weapon to grasp—another reminder of my vulnerability in this world. I forced myself to keep walking, keeping my pace steady, determined not to let fear take hold. If there was something watching me, I would rather not give it the satisfaction of seeing me falter.

The riverbank was further than I had anticipated, and by the time I reached its edge, my breath was steady but my pulse had quickened. The water was clear, revealing smooth stones beneath the surface, yet it moved unnaturally still, as if waiting for something to disturb it. I crouched, dipping my fingers into the cool current, letting the sensation ground me before my thoughts wandered too far into uncertainty.

The estate was far more than just a lavish home for a High Fae lord—it pulsed with magic, secrets buried beneath its elegance, and dangers that lurked just beyond sight. Whatever Tamlin had meant when he said the blight was beyond my comprehension, I had no doubt that his warning had been genuine. But if he expected me to stay within the walls of his manor, to ignore the mysteries unraveling around me, he would be sorely disappointed.

As I turned back toward the house, retracing my steps through the winding gardens, I knew one thing for certain—this place was not as serene as it seemed. If I wanted to survive here, I would need more than just caution. I would need knowledge, and more importantly, I would need to figure out whether the dangers

Tamlin spoke of were truly external—or if some of them resided within the very walls I had just left behind.