

The Final Test

By: Aelth Faye

“You've got to be kidding me,” Keira said. “*That* is the final test? I have to tell you apart from twenty girls?”

“And I'm going to be enchanted as a girl too,” Sean reminded her.

“And I have to kiss every single girl to figure out which one is you?”

Sean nodded.

“That's ridiculous! I can certainly tell you apart from a bunch of girls. Even if you are enchanted.”

“I won't be able to speak,” Sean began, ticking items off on his fingers. “I won't have any unique identifying marks. I will be dressed exactly as the other girls. I won't get to pick my place in the line-up. I won't be able to work any magic. I won't even be able to move any differently than the others. There is no other way I can think of to absolutely ensure that you are able to recognize me.”

“I'll know it's you!” Keira protested. “I love you! How could I not recognize you?”

Sean sighed and shook his head. “Just remember what I said. And when you're confronted with a gaggle of girls who all look alike, swallow your pride and kiss them.”

Keira snorted and stalked across the room. Then she stalked back. “You're enjoying this, aren't you? You just want to see me kiss a bunch of girls!”

“Well...I can't deny it...” Sean said with a growing grin.

“Did you put your father up to this?” she demanded.

His face was instantly solemn. “Of course not. I would never do that. You realize that if you fail any of the tests I'll never be able to see you again, don't you? This isn't a joking matter. My father is a powerful wizard and you have no hope of outwitting him by yourself, especially not on his land.”

“I suppose.” Keira sighed, then she added in pleading tones, “But do I really have to kiss them? I don't want to kiss a bunch of girls.”

“They aren't real girls,” he reassured her. “They're simulacrums.”

“Sima-what?”

“Golems, homunculi. You know, animated creations meant to resemble humans.”

“Created out of what?” she asked suspiciously.

“Well...you know...whatever is easiest to form...” Sean trailed off, suddenly very interested in the wall.

Keira sighed. Whenever Sean refused to answer something, she always hated the answer. But she did need to know, for her peace of mind. “And what substance is easiest to form, oh magical adept?”

“Well, it *could* be anything,” he reiterated.

“Sean...”

“Clay, generally,” he muttered.

She paused to process that. “So you expect me to kiss piles of dirt.”

“They'll look human,” he offered, smiling wanly.

“Piles of dirt enchanted to look like girls,” she clarified.

He gave her a bright, false smile. “That'll be cool, right? Something to tell the children?”

She sighed again, then glared at him. “I'm not sure if the part about them being dirt or the fact that they'll look like girls grosses me out more. You better be glad I love you so much, oh annoying magician.”

“So you'll do it?” His face lit up, and she grudgingly nodded.

“I'll do it. And you'll owe me. You got that?”

“Dearest Keira, I knew you wouldn't let me down.” He hugged her, then gave her a lingering kiss.

She hugged him back, but couldn't resist muttering. “You just want to see me kiss a bunch of girls, you degenerate.”

“But a handsome degenerate, and one who is devoted only to you,” Sean piously put in.

Keira looked at the line of girls and regretted ever agreeing to this. They all looked the same. Not exactly the same, that would have been too easy. No, they all looked very similar but with just enough differences to fool her into thinking that she could pick out the one that was Sean.

This one's hair was a little bit curlier, for instance. And that one had broader shoulders than the other girls. Or perhaps Sean was the one with the slightly crooked nose? No, he had to be the one with her fingers crossed. Or the one who was staring at Sean's father?

Keira was determined to figure it out without having to kiss them. This was supposed to be a test of intelligence and love, after all. Surely she could win it without relying on such tricks.

First she went through and picked out all the ones with pointier ears. Sean's ears were perfectly round on top, so those couldn't be him. Then she sorted through the rest, trying to find other common traits. Their eyes were all green, so that wouldn't help, but what about their wrists? Sean's would surely be stronger than the other girls'.

She had it down to four girls when she suddenly noticed that one of them had pointy ears. How could she have missed that? With a feeling of dread she looked at the other girls, only to see that one of the others, whose ears she was certain had been pointy before, were now rounded.

“You're changing their appearance,” she accused the wizard. “That's not fair!”

The wizard shrugged. “There's no rule preventing me from doing so.”

Keira glared at him, but knew that he was right. Darn it. She really was going to have to kiss them all. And she would have to hope that somehow Sean would be able to make it obvious which one he was. He said that he couldn't work any magic. How did he expect her to tell them apart with just a kiss?

She glanced back down the line of girls, and reluctantly approached the last one. The wizard surely wouldn't have put his son at the head of the line, so this way she should be able to avoid having to kiss all of them. Trying not to think about what she was doing, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against the rosy pink lips of the girl in front of her.

The girl froze, and after a second, Keira drew back. She felt a little sick, thinking about kissing another pair of cold, unyielding lips.

“What are you doing?” the wizard demanded.

“What does it look like?” she muttered sarcastically.

“You can't kiss them all,” he protested.

“There's no rule preventing me from doing so,” she announced, parroting his earlier reply.

The wizard stared at her, but then his lips curved up into a slight smile. “So, you do have some sense in you.”

Keira wanted to make a rude reply, but she couldn't think of one. Instead she stared at him coldly, then moved down the line to the next girl. Looking into its glassy green eyes, she swallowed hard, then kissed it.

After the next girl, she thought to glance around. Surely Sean wouldn't be able to resist showing

some sign of amusement. But, no, all of the girls were as expressionless as they had been before. With a sigh she got down to business.

One step to the side, lean in, press lips, take a step back, and then on to the next girl. If she didn't think about it, she could pretend she was just kissing some religious artifact. Or a small child's cheek. Or anything but a pile of dirt or a girl!

She kissed pair after pair of cold lips, coming closer and closer to the end of the line. Finally, she was facing the last girl. Her heart sank. She hadn't been able to recognize Sean. Now she'd never see him again. Why oh why hadn't they arranged some kind of signal beforehand? Surely he could have used scented chapstick or gargled peppermint or something before the test. But no, in her foolishness and arrogance, she had been sure that she could outsmart his father all by herself.

Almost without thinking, she leaned forward and kissed the pair of glistening ruby lips in front of her. She had leaned back before she suddenly realized what was different. Those lips had been warm!

She stared up at the beautiful, utterly feminine face in front of her, and kissed it again. Yep, no doubt about it, warm, soft lips that felt very familiar. She had just enough presence of mind to clamp her hand on its shoulder before she leaned away. It would be just her luck for the wizard to switch girls when she blinked.

She studied the face in front of her. It didn't really look any more like Sean than the other girls had. And this had been the first girl in line. Surely the wizard wouldn't have had Sean as the first person in line, would he? For a moment she wavered. Could this be another trick? Had the wizard seen through their plan and foiled them once again?

No, she couldn't second guess herself again. She had no other way to tell them apart, so this was her only chance.

"This is my true love," she announced, using the exact wording the wizard had said to use.

"This is Sean."

"Are you sure?" the wizard asked, his eyes glittering. "I'll give you the chance to pick again, if you like. Think carefully."

Keira frowned at him, thinking. He would certainly offer her the chance to pick again if she had guessed right, but would he offer it to her if she had picked wrong? That would be foolish on his part, wouldn't it? A bell started tolling far away and Keira ignored it, trying to think.

She shook her head, forcing herself to not get caught up in second-guessing herself. "This is him. I'm sure of it," she lied, hoping that she really was correct.

The wizard shrugged. "You are correct, but you're also too late. Midnight has just passed."

"What? There was no time limit!" Despite her protests, she looked around for a clock. Sure enough, it was a few seconds past twelve.

"It was in the first set of rules agreed upon," the wizard said calmly. "Each test shall be completed before the new day has begun."

Keira's heart sank, but she forced herself to think. There must be a way out of this. The mere fact that she hadn't been banished already proved it. But what was the answer?

She stared at the wizard, and then at the slim, elegant girl whose shoulder she was holding. Was she supposed to kiss it again? Would the kiss of true love turn it back into Sean? No, she'd already kissed it. That couldn't be it. But what was it?

She went back over the rules. No, all of the other rules had been done correctly. He hadn't broken his word, and neither had she. And yet there was a loophole, if she could find it.

Sean had always said she was smart, but she wasn't exactly proving it now. Well, how would Sean tackle this problem. What was it he always said? Start with the fact.

She had found Sean. That was a fact. That meant that she had won, presumably. They had agreed that she would only have until midnight of each day to finish each test. That was also a fact. She

had guessed after midnight. That was a...or was it?

She thought back to the clock. It had been seconds after midnight when she looked at it. And she had heard a bell start to toll after the wizard asked her if she was sure. Could she have guessed before the clock passed midnight? But, no, the wizard couldn't lie. He could twist words, but he couldn't break them.

And then she got it. That was why the wizard had offered her the chance to guess again. For time.

"The first guess was before midnight," she announced. "If I had changed my guess, you would be right. But I guessed correctly the first time, before midnight."

The wizard scowled at her, then reluctantly nodded. "Very well. You have won. Marry my son and be off with you."

He waved a hand and suddenly all of the girls disappeared. Keira glanced around in panic, but then saw that Sean was still standing beside her.

"Thank you, sir," she said, bowing politely to him. Then, before he could change his mind, she grabbed Sean's hand and walked out of the arched gate.

"You look lovely just the way you are," Sean commented. "And you're going to have chapped skin if you keep washing your face so much."

"You made me kiss dirt," Keira ground out. "Dirt that looked like girls, need I remind you. Of course I need to wash my face again. Maybe with caustic. Got any lye handy?"

"But it was so lovely," Sean said dreamily. "Two angels, their lips barely brushing in an act of purest love. What beauty, what--"

He broke off, sputtering, as Keira threw a handful of water in his face.

"What was that for?" he protested. "I was just complimenting you on your beauty!"

Keira glared at him. Then she started to grin, as she realized what to say in return. Sean eyed her warily.

"Well, it takes one to know one," Keira said airily.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You said that it was such a beautiful scene, me kissing a vision of beauty. Well, it was. You were quite beautiful, with lips like the finest rubies, cheeks tinted with the palest of rosy hues, alabaster--"

A pillow to the face cut her off. When she looked up, she saw that Sean's cheeks were well on their way to being the same rosy hue they had been as a girl.

"I did *not* look like that," he muttered defiantly.

"Oh, yes you did!" she crowed. "You were gorgeous! I might even be a tad bit jealous. Such flawless skin! Such long eyelashes! Such--"

She bit off the rest of her words as he slowly raised a hand.

"Pax," he offered, his head hanging. "I propose a deal."

She folded her hands in her lap and waited, knowing that she had won.

"If you never mention the fact that I looked like a girl--"

"*Was* a girl," she couldn't help putting in.

He sighed. "That I *was* a girl, then I'll never mention the fact that you had to kiss a bunch of simulacrum."

"No mention of dirt or of kissing girls?"

“None whatsoever. My word on it,” he promised, putting his hand over his heart.
“Deal,” she agreed, sealing it with a kiss.