

YVE VALE



BETWEEN
REALMS

FAE HEARTED BOOK ONE

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Thank you for reading!

Acknowledgements

Also by Yve Vale

About the Author

*To my husband,
thank you for being my Alpha... reader,
my sounding board, my cheerleader,
and my inspiration for many aspects
of my fictional guys.*

For my fellow authors and the book community.

*May you find your cinnamon roll monsters
and invite them into your heart.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The *Fae Hearted* series is a fantasy why choose romance with dark themes. It's set in the same universe as *Shadowcraft Academy* and *Bewitching Monsters* series but happens several centuries in the past and is what I call the origin story for the *Shadowcraft Universe*.

The female main character is a servant and second-class citizen in the fae realm and her personality will reflect this status. Don't worry, she's going to end up a badass. The prince is spoiled, but he will figure it out at some point.

If you love characters that have intense growth arcs, this series is for you.

The female main character will end up with more than one of the love interests. Group scenes are on the agenda.

This series also has a bit of MM romance within the group but the focus is on the female main character, and there's **no** cheating.

So if this is NOT your jam, then put this book down now and walk away. You won't be happy with this series, because there's going to be a 'sword fight' or two.

Wink wink nudge nudge. You know what I mean.

If you believe love is love, you like to have some laughs too, and of course, some spicy times, then please charge forward!

PLEASE NOTE:

This series also contains several dark themes that some readers may be sensitive to: what some might consider dub-con by coercion during the first interaction with the prince, abduction, violence, magic curses, and death.

For more information, visit: yvevale.com

SUMMONS

WYNSTELLE

Creeping toward the door, I desperately hope my Elven keeper won't prevent me from sneaking outside. My voluminous skirt conceals my blade as I cradle a small saucer in my palm.

I freeze as Merlara, my Elven guardian, calls out in irritation, "Wyn, I don't understand why you bother with the little ones. They don't dare harass the Elven households with their antics. There's no need to feed them."

"I like to give them treats." I shrug noncommittally. "The pixies are fun to watch as they battle over the bounty."

"*Humans.*" Merlara shakes her head with a wry grin on her lips. Despite being five centuries older, the beautiful female elf doesn't appear much older than my twenty years. "Just be back inside before dark. I don't want to hunt you down. Remember, there are dangers if you go beyond the meadow."

"I always stay within the perimeter of your territory," I project as much innocence as possible with my voice and smile. As much as I sometimes wish to explore beyond her small estate, I know I wouldn't fare well as an unescorted human. The elves haven't forgotten the wars from twenty years ago. That is only a short while, considering elves can often live a thousand years or more, barring any unforeseen incidents.

Just a few steps beyond the front door, I gaze up and marvel at the evening sky filled with pastel colors of peaches, watermelon, and lavender. I've only ever known the glorious skies in Elfhome, but they still take my breath away.

I don't have to travel far to find the little ones. Their secluded ring is in the forest just behind Merlara's house and the metal workshop.

After laboring in the foundry all day, my tired limbs feel revitalized being outdoors on my evenings off and the thought of trying out the new poses I studied in Merlara's sword technique books. My wild, golden-brown hair is plaited back and off my face as I often wear it. Having my hair singed off while working with fire isn't something I'd like to experience again.

Of course, I enjoy watching the little faeries play, but it isn't the only reason I sneak off to visit them. I also need to hide in their isolated and secret spot to practice my swordsmanship. It's forbidden for a human to wield a sword in the fae realm—or, as it's called by its population, Elfhome. Not even Merlara, my kind keeper, would approve of my illegal hobby.

I'm not sure why I have developed such a forbidden compulsion to master swordplay. Perhaps after crafting and polishing blades all day, I need to know what it feels like to brandish one, to experience the result of all my hard work.

Or perhaps, the more likely reason is that I have a genuine desire to break the rules and the thrill of the secrecy. Maybe I use this time to forget, for only a moment, that I'm nothing more than a lowly servant and imagine I have the freedom to do whatever I desire. I know freedom isn't an option for me, but it's lovely to pretend. My daydreams are all I will ever have for a life of my own. I don't even own the clothes on my back. Fortunately, Merlara often allows me a couple of hours a day to fantasize.

My life consists of working in the foundry—long, grueling days over molten metal and a polishing wheel, sharpening swords and daggers. My respites are reading myself to sleep

afterward or having philosophical conversations during meals with Merlara. Still, I need something else to fill my lonely, repetitive life. The forbidden challenge of swordplay is that for me.

As I enter the private field encircled by a grove, the flower faeries accept my meager offering. After they have their fill of milk, they delight in watching me as I practice my moves. I have long since given up worrying that the little ones will turn me over to the authorities. They love our secret playtime just as much as I do.

A pixie, who could fit into my pocket, zips around to distract me.

“Be careful!” I laugh when he dives, tugging my long braid as he flies by. “I’m not *that* good. I might hurt you.”

The little one laughs. “It’s more likely you’d hurt yourself,” he says with a grin.

“Alright. I suppose I should leave with the scraps of my dignity I have left.”

“See you tomorrow?” a little one asks.

“If I can get my work done early enough.”

“We can help!” they all squeak in unison.

“Oh, no no no, I remember how you *helped*.” I chuckle, thinking of the mess they made of the foundry. It took the rest of the day to clean up after their *assistance*.



Merlara greets me when I return home from my excursion. “I have another order for my new Orna blades. A dozen, due next week.”

“That particular design is proving to be popular.” I smile outwardly, but ready myself mentally for the exhausting days to follow. Unfortunately, there will be no time to play in the meadow for a while.

Now that I'm grown, I handle most of the hard labor, while Merlara focuses on detailing the intricate designs. I don't mind the work, but it's intense when a large order like this comes in. It means long and grueling days, sweating over a crucible with the bellows, pouring molten metals into their molds, and then chipping away the forms.

The strenuous work is also a dangerous process for a fragile mortal. Unlike me, Merlara seems to avoid any injury with her quick reflexes, keeping her burn-free. Only one of the many blessings of being an elf.

Even though I don't consider myself a jealous person, I would prefer to have been gifted with the elves' skills, beauty, and freedom. Since that's impossible, I find contentment in achieving what I can in my sheltered life instead. I'm proud of being an asset and not a burden to my Elven keeper, knowing I exceed Merlara's expectations.

After the dangerous part of the sword-making is done, I'm tasked with grinding and polishing. I look forward to the meditative process, honing the blade to perfection. The polishing continues until my fingers are numb and my arms are useless. Even though I enjoy trying to make something perfect, the thought makes me tired just thinking about the large order.

"Get some rest tonight. We have a long day ahead of us," Merlara says. "I know you love reading your books, but we can't have you getting hurt again because you're too tired."

"I'll get a proper rest," I grumble, knowing I don't have the elves' endurance, which we discovered when I pushed myself to work longer, more grueling hours than my human body is capable of. I still have a faint scar on my arm where I was burned for my efforts. Sometimes, I catch myself rubbing the old wound—the pain is still vivid in my mind. But that is only one of the many injuries I have suffered in the hazardous foundry.

Changing out of my worn work clothes, I slip on my nightgown and sigh as I look around my tiny private personal space. My room is small, just big enough to hold a bunk and a

wardrobe cabinet. It doesn't matter how small and simple the room is. I have all that I truly need. My belly is full. I have a soft, warm bed. Stacks of books are piled in the corner. My mind is engaged with books and conversations with Merlara. Freedom is all that I lack, but even my keeper can't offer me that. Besides, she has told me stories about how most humans in the mortal realm struggle to have all the blessings I have. They also are not free since their kings and lords demand large tithings and fealty.

Crawling into my narrow bed, I light a candle and promise myself that I will only read one chapter, which turns into two. However, I stop there to ensure I will still be fresh enough for work in the morning.



I wake to Merlara calling to me, alarm ringing in her voice.

I rush out of my room, eyes wide. Whatever rattles my keeper must be terrible. Merlara is *never* unsettled. I have never seen Merlara cry, not even when the subject of her dead mate comes up.

Merlara closes the front door and leans against it as she collects herself.

“What’s wrong?” I run to Merlara’s side. I check my keeper for injury or some sign of what just happened.

“I had hoped this day wouldn’t come,” my keeper whispers.

“You’re scaring me.” I peek out the window to see if I can catch a glimpse of who or what upset her, but I see nothing.

Turning back, I notice a letter crumpled in Merlara’s graceful hands.

“They have summoned you to the Ryven’s Court,” she says with a grimace.

I stumble back in shock. “For what purpose? Why me?”

Merlara shakes her head. “The summons doesn’t say.”

Surprised by the news, I drop into a nearby chair. I have done my best to fit in among the elves, though, no matter how much I've tried to blend in and become part of the background, I'm not fae. I don't have the glamorous glow of the elves or their elegant, graceful physique. I'm a head shorter than the shortest elf I've seen. My aura doesn't radiate power or magic.

"*Duller than a troll,*" I'd often say to myself, growing up amongst the beautiful elves.

The summons is ominous. Dread fills me. Have they found out about my illegal sword practice? Will they banish me to the mortal realm? Or worse? I have read stories of humans being executed for less serious transgressions.

Gathering my wits, I read the official royal correspondence myself:

"Wynstelle of House Zaleria, residing in Betonie, is summoned to Ryven Castle, to report on her own and no later than the full moon."

"By the full moon!" My lungs tighten in my chest. "That's only three nights from now."

"You must leave immediately to meet your deadline."

"Why doesn't it say why I'm being called?" I ask, desperation in my voice. "Is it because I'm of age now? Are they sending me back to the mortal realm because I'm human?"

Merlara sighs, and her shoulders slump ever so slightly. "It has been known to happen with foundlings. You're no longer a sick child or need fae magic to survive. I feared this day might come. I had hoped they would let you live out your short life here with me."

"But you and Elfhame are all I've known! They can't send me back... I have no one there! We don't even know who my parents are or if they're still alive." My nose crinkles in disgust. "I can't live with *humans*. I know nothing about them except the awful things you've told me!" I wrap my arms

around my torso, trying to remain calm. “Is there anything we can do?”

“The Ryven Court once allowed me to heal your illness and be your keeper, but I can’t fight them if they choose to send you back now.” Merlara stares at the letter. “Although, perhaps they want an audience with you to determine your *continued* future. I will write a letter stating my offer to keep you. I will explain you are a valued assistant. Especially with the loss of Roul, I need someone to work with me in the foundry.”

“Oh, no!” I say, remembering what we were supposed to start today. “How are you going to get your sword order done?”

“Never mind that.” Merlara shakes her head with a sad expression. “Your well-being is more important than making a few blades. Let’s get you prepared for your journey.”



Merlara has a bag of provisions packed for me within the hour.

“Here is my letter of intent,” she says stoically and tucks the envelope into my pack.

I hug her goodbye. “I don’t want to leave.”

Although not usually affectionate, Merlara returns my embrace and kisses my cheek. “And I don’t wish you to leave.”

“What should I expect in Ryven?” I pull away and fiddle with my pack. “Should I brace for the worst outcome?”

“With nobility, speak only when spoken to. Do whatever they ask of you. Royalty has no patience for being denied their... *whims*,” Merlara explains. “Yet, when you speak, let your intelligence shine. Most elves have had little to no contact with humans. When they have, it was often during the war—which means they might be hostile toward you. They will expect the worst of you because of your race. Show them

that not all humans are bad. Show them you are smart and kind.”

“I’ll try.” I frown at the weight of what she’s telling me. How am I supposed to impress the royal courts when I’m just a simple human servant?

“Be careful of the fae in the cities,” Merlara continues. “They are craftier than those out here on the outskirts—the royals, especially.” She opens her mouth as if to add more, but doesn’t.

I shiver. The local elves barely tolerate my presence. My future interactions with distrustful and all-powerful royals won’t likely go well.

Not for the first time, I wonder about the few humans in the Elfhome realm who are servants. Did they have to go through this process? Perhaps they only wish to know what I can offer their kingdom.

Although most are servants, there is one account of a human advisor to royals several centuries ago. Surely, with my sheltered, short life, I couldn’t be an asset such as that.

No. I always assumed I would continue being Merlara’s servant. I had come to terms that I’d never have a life of my choosing, no mate or children of my own, if I remained in the fae realm. But I’d rather have that lonely fate than return to the cruel mortals.

But what if I’m forced to return? Will I ever fit in with other humans when I’ve only known the world of Elfhome?

THE ROAD

WYNSTELLE

*A*s I leave the only home I've ever known, I hear my Elven keeper mutter that the royals have lost their minds by making a human travel alone.

But what am I to do? Perhaps the challenge is some kind of test of my survival skills.

I have never traveled outside of Betonie, let alone to Ryven, the region's capital—one of many Elven kingdoms around the world. At least, I only have to follow the well-traveled main road. Hopefully, I walk swiftly in hopes of making it to Crowland, the closest village, before dark.

Merlara gave me enough coins to secure lodging at the inn in Crowland. A few extra coins were added as incentive if the innkeeper is resistant to allowing an unescorted human to stay. I fear they might refuse me and I will have to sleep unprotected, where any creature or fae with a grudge against humans might attack me.

Three hours later, I can no longer see Betonie in the valley behind me. The dirt road rises and dips, obstructing the view in both directions. The path twists and wends around large sycamore and oak trees.

I wonder how different the mortal realm is from these Elven forests. I might find out soon if I'm exiled. I've read

accounts from Elven explorers that the mortal's plants and trees are duller, not as vibrant. In Elfhome, there are more flowers, with the bushes and trees that vary in a rainbow of hues. In the human realm, they are commonly limited to a palette of greens.

Since it might be the last time I can enjoy it, I renew my interest in the lush foliage. Admiring their subtle glow, I brush my hands along the leaves that reach out over the road. Coming across red Rangel flowers, I nod a hello to the faeries circling them. Their tiny faces seem shocked at either the fact someone acknowledged them or that a human is traveling alone. I don't stop to find out since I'm trying to hurry to arrive in Crowland as soon as possible.

Despite my quick pace, I'm soon lost in a trance by the realm's beauty.

It's after a few hours that my survival instincts jar me back to high alert.

Sensing someone follows me, I glance around, though I can't see much in any direction, whether it be because of the dense forest, rolling hills, or the winding road. I have rarely felt threatened in the mid-sized town of Betonie. Only once, when I wandered too far into the wilderness beyond Merlara's estate, did I sense the wilder fae take notice of the mortal in their lands.

Perhaps the observer is only one of the little folk, but intuition tells me it's not their lighthearted, mischievous presence.

My warm, handmade cloak does nothing to ease the chill I now feel.

Will I even make it to Ryven?

I'm glad I have brought my dagger. My hand tightens around the handle, and it helps steady my nerves. I'm not supposed to own a weapon to defend myself, but I secretly forged this blade. Concealed in my skirt pocket, I will only brandish it if I have no other choice.

I quicken my pace and hope it won't trigger a predatory reaction from whoever or *whatever* might follow me.

After a half-hour passes without incident, I believe my imagination has gotten away from me once again. I haven't even seen another traveler yet. Maybe I'm just nervous. Although the nagging sensation that I'm being watched hasn't let up.

Taking a deep breath and scanning my surroundings, I slow back to my natural gait. Up ahead, I spot a flat boulder where I can rest and eat.

Sitting down after hours of walking, I sigh as my nerves unwind. I shake my head, thinking about how I riled myself up over nothing. Being on my own for the first time in my life is disconcerting. Playing in the meadow with the faeries, in what is essentially my yard, doesn't count as alone time. And even when I am alone in the foundry, Merlara is only down the road at the market selling her wares.

I have never experienced independence before. Though I wonder if this is actual independence when it's because of a summons that will probably end with my banishment.

On the wide, flat boulder, I pull out Merlara's bread and break off a small piece as an offering to nature and any little folk in this forest, to let them know I'm a friend. Not that they will do much in order of protection, but I don't need the unfamiliar inhabitants to harass me, either.

After taking a bite, I force a hard swallow. My skin crawls.

Again, I have the unmistakable sensation of many eyes upon me.

The forest stills and quiets. It definitely isn't my imagination this time.

A growl rumbles behind me, among the trees.

I freeze.

How I wish I could shift to another realm right now. No matter what creature created that sound, it will not end

favorably for me.

Slowly, I withdraw my dagger from my hidden skirt pocket. Even if an elf catches me with it, I will be in more trouble *not* using it now.

“I mean no harm, and I’m a sanctioned human!” I announce. “Please don’t attack. I will be out of your lands shortly.”

Reasoning, I hope that will work. Often, the animals in Elfhome understand the spoken language. Although they rarely care to listen if it counters their instinct. But there are also elves blessed with the magic to control the beasts.

Another growl—this one comes from my right. It sounds different. Is it the same creature or a pack ready to pounce? Pack-mentality does not bode well.

In my peripheral vision, I see something lunge for me.

The creature soars with a growl in its throat on its way to tear out mine.

I roll off the boulder, swinging my dagger in an arc to protect my body.

The creature screeches as my blade makes contact.

I land with a thud and knock my head on the ground. Disoriented, I can only gaze up to see if my attacker is ready to pounce.

A blur of another massive animal collides with the first to attack.

Two creatures fight over my flesh.

Great, the winner gets to eat me.

Gritting my teeth, I realize there’s no place to take cover. I crawl a few strides to distance myself, hoping both attackers will limp away, injured. Though I believe my weak defense will only delay my inevitable demise.

Looking back to the boulder, I register the two kinds of creatures fighting.

The first is a ghoul. The second is a grizzly bear.

I have never seen a bear in person, and its size and speed stun me.

Although the ghoul's poisonous claws swipe at the bear, it's no contest. It can't even make contact. The bear knocks each attempt away as if the ghoul were a fly and not the size of a human.

The bear's paw strikes the ghoul's belly, exposing its entrails to the air.

The bear dives for the ghoul's neck. Its bone-crunching jaws clamp down.

The snap of its spine echoes through the forest.

With the ghoul's death-whimper, the fight is over.

The bear turns its giant head to look at me.

Still stunned on the ground, I scurry backward and onto my feet.

One step back and then another, I try to not challenge the bear into an attack by staring directly into its hypnotizing golden eyes. But I can't look away.

After sucking in a breath, I plead, "I'm a human. I'm sure I won't taste very good."

I keep my knife tucked close to my side, pointed down and unthreatening, but ready to bring it up to defend myself. With its massive claws, I will be lucky to annoy the beast with my sliver of metal.

The bear lumbers toward me. The ghoul's rancid blood drips from its enormous jaw. In only a couple of quick paces, its muzzle is within snapping distance.

"Thank you for killing the ghoul. Now please, leave me alone. I will be out of your territory soon. I promise." I close my eyes and wait for my disembowelment.

Instead, it sniffs loudly, and makes a chuffing sound, as if laughing at my acceptance of death.

My eyes pop open.

The bear gazes into my soul. I can't look away. The depth of its being entralls me.

Finally, the bear breaks the enchantment and saunters back into the forest.

When it's out of sight, I gasp for air, shove the blade into my pocket, and snatch up my bag. Before I can hurry away from the scene, a male's voice booms, "*Female!*"

Although I'm accustomed to and usually unfazed by Elven stealth, the bear encounter has frayed my nerves. I jump and tense, clutching the blade's handle in my pocket.

The male sounds angry.

My heart races.

Did he see my dagger?

OAKES

WYNSTELLE

I slowly turn to face the angry male, gripping the dagger now inside my pocket. I can tell by the commanding voice the person behind me is an elf, and thus one of my superiors by default.

“Yes, my lord?” My tone radiates my anxiety and fear of punishment just for being a human. If he has seen the blade I carry, I will likely be executed for it.

My hand tightens on the leather grip. I can’t use the blade against him, but it gives me some sense of control until I figure out why he’s angry.

I can barely suppress my gasp as I catch sight of him. Nearly two heads taller than me, he is one of the tallest and most muscular elves I have ever seen. He is also the most attractive, which is saying a lot. I study him, guessing I wouldn’t quite be able to wrap my arms all the way around his broad shoulders. Why do I imagine measuring him with my own body? Maybe I knocked my head harder than I realized. I will never and can never touch an Elven male in such an intimate way.

His overwhelming size projects the image of an intimidating warrior, but it’s balanced by a gentle expression on his face. As he comes closer, I notice his eyes radiate worry, not anger. I realize now that the tension in his voice is concern for me. Odd.

“Are you alright?” the elf asks. His voice is deep and rich, matching his powerful presence. The sound of it vibrates through me like the intoxicating whiskey Merlara sometimes lets me sip in celebration after a large sword order is complete.

Shaking my head clear of that sensation, I check my body once more, in case I have an injury that hasn’t registered yet. “Yes. I think so.”

“Did I see a *bear* run away from you?” He turns to look over his shoulder, scanning the area.

“Um... You did?” I say as if it’s a question. I’m still confused about why that happened. I direct my attention to what’s left of the ghoul. Enormous claw marks mutilate its already disgustingly distorted and skeletal body. Its distended belly is flayed open and adds to its usual deathly stench.

“Unusual behavior for both the ghoul and the bear,” the elf murmurs to himself. Then he steps closer, eyeing me as if I were more than I appear to be. “Why did a bear kill the ghoul for you?”

“I... I don’t know,” I whisper, still baffled.

“Do you have magic over animals?”

“None.” Has this male been chewing on hemma weed and lost his mind? I point at my face to indicate my appearance as a human. “I’m mortal. I don’t have gifts like that.”

He doesn’t acknowledge my answer, but continues to probe further, “What’s a human doing alone on the road?”

Now I’m being accused of being a rogue. When will this interrogation end? I clear any irritation in my throat before I answer. “The Ryven Royal Court has requested my appearance. Please, sir, I need to be on my way so I can reach Crowland before sunset—before other nastier creatures might hunt me down.”

“Hmm.” He eyes me as if reading my every thought, every lie, and every emotion—all within a moment or two.

Will he let me be? Or will he try to claim me for his own servant before I can even reach Ryven? Although he would be

a handsome keeper, I don't expect the royal court will be happy if I do not show.

I dare to stare back, openly evaluating him as well. He doesn't seem to be a cruel male, but looks can be deceiving. All my life, Merlara has warned me that elves and humans are both full of deception.

Being Elven, he's gorgeous, ageless, and tall. His solid, muscular figure is barely contained by his fitted tunic cinched at his waist with a belt. A heavy, well-made cloak accentuates his broad shoulders. Silky brown hair hangs in loose waves over his shoulders, framing a strong jaw, and just covering his pointed ears. Amber eyes scrutinize every inch of me while I do the same to him.

In my quick assessment of a detailed hilt, I see he has a high quality and expensive sword in his back holster. Perhaps he's an off-duty, high-ranking Ryven soldier or commander.

"On what grounds have you been requested?" He places his huge but well-proportioned hands on his hips.

My heart thumps wildly at the thought of his powerful hands holding my hips, or perhaps other, more intimate parts, of my body. It's a silly and dangerous fantasy. One I will have to catalog for another day, or better yet, erase all together. My gaze finally drops to the ground, sadness overcoming me. "Unfortunately, I could be told to return to the mortal realm."

"Have you done something to anger the courts?"

My eyes flash up to see if he knows my secrets. My pulse quickens, but I keep my appearance calm to not give away my crimes. "I... I don't think so." It's close enough to the truth. I don't *know* if they are aware that I illegally practice with swords.

He raises his eyebrow as if he senses my tension. "Why are you in Elfhome in the first place?"

The line of questioning doesn't surprise me. Fae, especially the elite Elven caste, are often curious about my presence, if not outright hostile. At least he doesn't seem

disdainful toward humans. Though elves rarely feel the need to be polite and tell me their names before an interrogation.

“I was a sick infant, a foundling. My Elven keeper discovered me abandoned during the war and petitioned to save my life.”

“Who was your keeper?”

Was.

By his choice of words, he must assume that the arrangement is over. “Merlara and Roul, House Zaleria of Betonie.”

“I heard there was a mortal in Betonie. Were you the only one?”

“I... *was.*” I drop my gaze, realizing life will never be the same for me again. If he weren’t here, I would let my tears flow.

Then the Elven male continues his walk along the road toward Ryven and motions for me to join him. “My name is Oakes. What is yours?”

Hurrying to catch up, I smirk to myself. Of course, his name is Oakes. With his massive arms and solid build, he’s built like an oak tree. He gives off an air of wisdom and a subtle, nurturing quality. And just like an oak, inexplicably, as I move closer, I feel safe just by being near him. I’m drawn to him in a way I’ve never experienced before.

“I’m Wynstelle.” I wave my hand casually as I add, “Although most call me Wyn.”

“To insult you?” Oakes asks with no malice.

“No.” I shrug. “Well, I didn’t *think* so... until now.”

“If that is the name you prefer, then I’m sure it isn’t,” Oakes says with authority. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I like Wyn. It’s short and to the point, like me.” I tilt my head and smile at my own joke.

“So... *Wyn*, it’s getting late. Do you intend to walk the entire night?” His eyebrows raise in jest—an unusual trait for

an elf, but especially odd to joke with a stranger. “Or were you planning on sleeping on the roadside?”

The bear is still gone from sight, but that doesn't necessarily make me feel any better. What if the bear realizes it passed up a tasty meal? What if there are more ghouls waiting to attack? Or something more dangerous lurks out there? I need to rest soon, and not knowing if I'm going to be eaten in the middle of the night will certainly hinder my sleep. I can't even seek refuge in the trees. Bears are experts in climbing. And ghouls can climb, too.

“I know I shouldn't nap on the roadside. I'm mortal, not stupid.” I sigh, irritated by his insinuation that I might be. “I had hoped to reach Crowland before dark, but I haven't traveled anywhere before. How much farther do I have to walk?”

“Crowland is a stretch too far for *me* to reach on foot tonight,” he states simply.

I bite my lip and mumble my frustration, “I left as soon as I received my summons. I suppose I don't walk as fast as Merlara, since she figured I could reach Crowland by nightfall.” I breathe in slowly to calm my nerves. “I wish the royal court would have allowed me more time to plan.”

“Why didn't your keeper accompany you?” Oakes asks.

I glance back in the direction of Betonie and explain, “My letter said I was to arrive alone.”

“She didn't insist upon coming with you until you reached the gates?” Oakes shakes his head in disbelief.

My energy drains away at the realization. Why didn't Merlara insist on coming? To ease my pangs of rejection, I make an excuse for her not offering. I remind myself that she had much to do, and she would be hard pressed to get her order complete in time with my absence. “I didn't want to make things more difficult for her by asking.”

“More difficult? Were you much trouble to begin with?” Oakes smiles, but there's also a genuine interest in my answer.

“Well, no. I work hard every day. I serve loyally. Maybe I wasn’t *always* pleasant in my youth, but—”

“You don’t strike me as a terror,” he states, gazing down at me like he can see right into my soul. Perhaps he can.

I blush. “Thanks.” I check behind me and pucker my lips with worry. “However, right now, I’m concerned about what to do now if I can’t make it to Crowland. I never heard of a ghoull coming after the living! What if it wasn’t the only one in this forest? And I’ve heard bears will attack people in their territory, following someone for miles,” I say, in a rush like a confession. My anxiety about this journey reaching a new height. “I fear I won’t make it to Ryven Castle alive.”

“I’m sure you will make it.” Oakes then says thoughtfully, “The bear was inches from you, but didn’t harm you. Still no idea why it didn’t?”

“Maybe I wasn’t appetizing enough.” I shrug off the seriousness of the confrontation and hurry to keep pace with Oakes’ long legs. “None of it makes sense. The bear killed the ghoull that was attacking me, and afterward, I told it to leave me alone. It sniffed me instead of taking a bite and walked off.”

“Strange behaviors today... A ghoull attacked the living, and a bear attacked a ghoull—to save you, of all things.” Oakes lifts his eyebrows slightly. “Did you notice any other beings about?”

“No one, except a few flower faeries not too long before the incident.” I glance around to see if I can spot more. “I didn’t even know you were nearby, so obviously my senses aren’t very keen.”

“I get the sense that you are still afraid of the bear?”

I swallow down my nerves and nod. “I’m more concerned about why the bear would do what it did, and if it’s still following me because he was saving me for a later meal.”

“It would have harmed you before if that were its intent. No, I believe it meant to rescue you. Perhaps you elicit a protective nature in others. I think *I* might be under your spell

already.” Oakes smiles, his perfect teeth and sharp canines on display. “I wish I would have met up with you earlier so I could have assisted you.”

“That’s kind, but it would have upset me if you’d been hurt.” As I say this, I realize how true the words are. I don’t know this male, but I know I never want to see him in harm’s way. “Especially on my account,” I add.

“If it meant you were unscathed, then that’s all that matters.”

It is odd for an elf to say such a thing to a stranger, a human, but I suppose he could just have a kind heart. Then I wonder if Merlara would risk herself to protect an unknown human.

“Would you like me to accompany you to Ryven? Many creatures might not think twice about attacking you, but they wouldn’t risk challenging me.”

“Well, I…” I stumble over my words. I worry about so many things. Will my attraction only grow with his nearness? Will I get myself or him in trouble by allowing such a thing?

And why does this elf want to keep me safe?

My intuition senses no ill-intent, but I’m unsure. “I… I’m supposed to arrive alone.”

Oakes ignores my comment. “Are you worried *I* might attack you?”

“I suppose if you were going to, you would have done so by now. And it isn’t as if saying *no* would stop you from hurting me.” I shake my head. “I’m not frightened of you, but if I turn out to be wrong, try not to hold it against me.” I quirk my lip.

Oakes doesn’t seem to appreciate my joke. He stops and stares at me. “You don’t trust elves.”

Slowly, I turn to face him, frantically trying to think of what to say in response. My pulse races with the knowledge that elves are easily offended. “I trust Merlara. However, elves haven’t been overly friendly to me. Not that I was allowed out

of the workshop often.” I pause and ask, “May I ask why would you want to help me, anyway?”

“Do you have such a low opinion of my kind that you believe one of us wouldn’t be generous or helpful?” Oakes frowns. “Why would you want to stay in these lands if that is the case?”

Oh no. Now, I have insulted all fae. “I understand elves can be generous. Other than my keeper, no elf has ever helped me before. But I suppose I’ve never needed to rely on anyone besides Merlara. I have little experience outside of the workshop.” Opening my hands in surrender, I continue. “I enjoy working for Merlara, and I want to stay with her. I’ve never been to the mortal realm, and I’ve heard it’s brutal, especially to females.”

Oakes’ tension dissipates at my words. “No, you’re correct. It’s smart to be wary of strangers, so I won’t fault you for poking at my pride.” Oakes gently places his hand on my shoulder. “I was already heading to a traveler’s shelter that I have access to. You may join me if you wish.”

A jolt of energy rushes through me at his touch. I steady myself, wondering if the sensation is because of a magic that he possesses... or perhaps this is just what it feels like to be touched by an attractive male. My cheeks heat with something more than embarrassment. “That’s very gracious of you to offer, but I’m supposed to travel alone, according to my summon’s instructions. I don’t wish to be a burden.”

“You aren’t a burden.” Oakes winks conspiratorially.

My insides somersault with the small, friendly gesture.

“I won’t tell the court if you don’t. We can go our separate ways at the city gates,” Oakes states as if it is already decided and continues walking down the road. His swift gait becomes faster than before, and I quicken my steps to keep up.

A half-hour later on our walk, Oakes hasn’t engaged me in conversation, and I’m happy for it. The hurried pace winds me, and I don’t want to prove I am a burden after all. Besides,

I'm horribly prone to being competitive even with a superior race.

Oakes turns off the road into the lush forest.

I freeze in my tracks, staying on the wide dirt path. "Where are you going?"

He waves me to follow him. "Come, little mortal. It's safe. There's a hidden shelter for traveling elves."

I sigh. My apprehension is for nothing. He isn't luring me out to murder me in the woods. He wouldn't need to hide to kill me off, anyway.

Of course it makes sense that the dominant class of fae would have privileges, such as road shelters.

Just ten of his strides off of the main road, there is a small cabin masked by the heavy foliage. With a key, he lets himself in and holds the door open for me to enter, as if I were an equal and not a subservient class. I feel my cheeks heat with another blush.

The one-room shelter is small but well-maintained. Four stuffed sleeping pads are stacked in a corner. Each is big enough for one person. There's a chill in the air, the temperature having dropped since the sun fell below the horizon.

Oakes flips the lock on the closed door.

Suddenly, I realize how intimate this setting is. I'm going to sleep next to an unfamiliar male.

Oakes places one mat at one wall and a second mat at the opposite wall of the cabin. With a bump of his foot, he scoots his sleeping mat tight against the wall. Watching me stand in the middle of the shelter as if I'm a stunned deer, he sits down, leans back, and opens his pack. "You have food?"

Snapping out of my shock, I adjust the other mat against the wall and sit as he does. "Merlara gave me provisions to last me the next couple of days."

"Good." Oakes rummages through his pack, retrieves an apple, and then bites into it.

“May I ask why you are headed to Ryven?” I ask, realizing now he hasn’t mentioned his business in the capital.

“I live there,” Oakes says curtly.

I hesitate to press for more answers. Is he already frustrated with his mortal tag along? Daring to be my curious self, I ask, “What were you doing so far away from home?”

“On an errand.” Oakes takes another bite of his meal.

I recognize the Elven evasion. While they aren’t known for outright lies, they will lie by omission. Perhaps he’s on a secret quest from the capital. Or maybe he is simply visiting relatives. Either way, he doesn’t wish to share that bit of information. I fantasize I’m an Elven female and he’s a rogue who will teach me the ways of the world before we part ways.

“I haven’t seen your bear,” Oakes says, almost implying I’m keeping a secret from him about the animal.

“Maybe you scared him off.” I nibble on my bread. Having lost some of my precious food during the ghoulish attack, I need my supplies to last.

Oakes tilts his head, studying me closely, like I’m an oddity. “Do humans always eat so little?”

I squirm under his scrutinizing amber gaze. “Um... I’m rationing.”

Oakes straightens his back, becoming more alert. His eyes flash with concern as he leans forward. “Why?”

“Because I’m unsure what will happen in the next few days.” I wrap my food back up, losing my appetite under his questioning. “I only have what’s in this sack. Everything I own is in here. I have a clean dress for my court appearance and a couple of coins to buy more food and lodging if I’m lucky enough to return to Betonie. But I will need every crumb if I’m banished to the mortal realms.” I shove my food back in my pack, feeling as though I’ve already been banished. “I doubt humans will want to help an outsider, especially one who knows nothing about their ways. And I don’t know if I can trust any of them to even ask for help.”

Oakes nods without comment and tosses me an extra apple from his pack.

“I can’t,” I protest and lean forward to hand it back to him.

“Eat it,” he orders, his tone firm but kind. “I will not have you go hungry on my watch.”

“Thank you.” I turn the large fruit in my small hands. “I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t helped me today. I do not take your generosity lightly, since I know I won’t have it easy after we part ways.”

Why does the thought of saying goodbye feel like a hot slice of a blade?

He doesn’t respond except for a slight nod, silently accepting my gratitude.

I also take his silence as an agreement that I’m likely to need all the resources I can get when I am sent away to the mortal realm.

I quickly force myself to eat the apple despite my churning gut.

Curling up on the mat, I wrap my cloak around me, shivering from the cold and my nerves. “Sleep well,” I wish him and close my eyes, trusting a stranger to do me no harm. Not that I expect him to. He seems to be an exceptionally caring elf.

“Until the morrow.” Oakes says, then he must see my slight shaking. He crosses the room and places his cloak over me to keep me warm.

I sit up and try to hand it back to him. “My lord, I can’t accept your generosity. You’ve already given me too much.”

“Call me Oakes, and I insist you accept.” He gently presses his offering back toward me. “Besides, it’s only a simple apple and some warmth.”

It has also been his company, his protection, and this safe place to rest, but I let him win this argument. “Thank you,” I whisper and relax into the warmth of his cloak, taking in his scent—pine trees and maple syrup.

He returns to his mat, but I feel his eyes on me, studying me until the evening light fades entirely.

LONELINESS

WYNSTELLE

“*W*ake up, little mortal.” Oakes nudges my sleeping mat, then my back.

“Wyn,” I correct and rub my eyes, but don’t move. I refuse to open my eyes all the way. There’s barely enough light to see his imposing figure in the dark cabin. I squint at him while he squats down to wake me.

“Wynstelle, wake up.” He bumps my hip now with the back of his hand, almost like a swat.

“What? I’m getting up.” I unfurl my cloak, pout, and stretch.

As he slides his cloak back onto his shoulders, he stands up and studies my every move. Becoming self-conscious, I pull my cloak over my body, but then quickly realize how ridiculous that is.

He isn’t interested in me—a mortal human.

“I called to you several times. Finally, I had to resort to physically prodding you.” His voice doesn’t sound irritated, rather it’s playful. “Do all mortals sleep so soundly?”

“I don’t know about other humans’ sleeping habits, but it’s even earlier than I usually get up,” I huff out an explanation. I still haven’t moved off the mat. “Which is saying a lot.”

Done waiting on me, Oakes' large hands pick me up by the waist and deposit me on my feet with as much effort as picking up a loaf of bread.

Our bodies are close, barely touching. I shoot my gaze all the way up his towering body to meet his glowing golden eyes. Why do they glow now? Is it a trick of the light?

With his hands lingering on my waist, I'm suddenly very awake.

Yet, after the initial thrill of contact with this handsome elf, his forwardness unsettles me. Emotions swirl with the forbidden desire that pools low in my belly.

I grab my pack and sling it over my shoulder.

"You could have just left without me," I say through a tense jaw.

Perhaps separating from him will cure me of this illicit urge before it makes me do something stupid—before he reminds me of how ridiculous I'm being for feeling this way.

"Yes, I could have left you," Oakes grumbles. "But what sort of elf would I be if I rescinded my protection because you're slow to wake up?" He hurries out of the shelter as if I have insulted him again.

I want to kick myself. What have I done? I'm no good at interacting with anyone other than Merlara and the faeries.

I rush after him and clasp his arm to make him hear me.

My hand tingles with the contact, and I suck in a breath. Again, I'm playing a dangerous game by daring to touch him.

My eyes wide, I explain in a panic, "I never meant to suggest you wouldn't honor your word."

Stock still, Oakes stares at my hand that inexplicably remains on his forearm.

Why did I touch him? A familiar touch by a human isn't allowed.

I quickly remove my offending appendage. "Goddess, I'm sorry." I hold my hand behind my back as if I can't trust it to

behave around him. And to be fair, maybe my hands *shouldn't* be trusted around him.

Oakes grasps my other hand to show he doesn't mind my forwardness. His huge thumb brushes over my knuckles. "I know you didn't mean to offend me. It's just... I take my promises seriously. I *will* deliver you safely to the gates. Alright?"

"Alright," I agree. "Not that it is an excuse, but I'm not quite awake yet."

"I need no apology." He locks the shelter, and suggests. "You need to relieve yourself?"

I nod and hurry off behind the bushes and trees to empty my bladder. When I return, we hike back to the main road.

As we walk along the barely illuminated path, I have the nagging suspicion something other than my comment bothers him. Something in his expression seems conflicted, but I rationalize it can't have anything to do with me. Can it? Maybe he's nervous about escorting me against the royal court's orders. Should I release him from his promise of protection? What if he were to get into trouble on my account? I can't have that weighing on me.

"Oakes, you should leave me behind. I release you from your promise," I say quietly, almost hoping he doesn't hear me. I don't really *want* to let him go. Have I already started feeling attached to him? Surely, it is just that he is kind to me and radiates safety. Yet I'm already craving our next forbidden touch. I continue, "I would be very upset with myself if you were to suffer the wrath of the royals for helping me. You have been far too generous already."

He pulls an apple from his pocket and hands it to me. His shoulders relax, and something eases in him. "Are you trying to get rid of me because you don't like me?" he asks with a grin.

"*What?*" I yelp. "No. I like you. I mean, I don't *not* like you. Not that I am saying... you know, um. You are... wonderful, but—"

“Why are you so flustered?” Oakes asks, even more amused by my rambling.

I pull myself together, taking in a deep breath. “Well, I... I don’t know how to act around others, except for Merlara,” I explain, the words tumbling out of my mouth before I can stop them. “I’m usually on my own. Most days, Merlara leaves me the entire day to work in her foundry while she’s selling her wares at the market.”

“Do you experience loneliness?” Oakes asks, taking me off-guard.

I frown at his speculation that I might be devoid of the emotion because I’m human. “I have a full range of emotions, much like elves, from what I can tell.” I might accidentally allow myself to glower at him.

Oakes eyes me, quirking a brow. “That wasn’t my question or my assumption.”

Oh. Why did I assume he would think that? He really doesn’t seem to be like some of the other elves who snub me in Betonie.

Realizing I am being defensive for no reason, I whisper, “Yes, I get lonely sometimes.” Not wanting to dwell on my sadness, I turn the conversation to him. “Do you get lonely when you travel?”

“I’m not alone very often,” Oakes says with a melancholy that only makes me want to ask him a thousand more questions, which he’s likely never going to answer. “I’ve enjoyed the quiet on this trip.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” I flush bright pink, feeling like an invader, and slow my walk to give him space. “I... I didn’t mean to disturb your solitude.”

I *have* been a burden.

“Sweet mortal, I only meant that my life can be hectic, with hardly a moment of peace. It wasn’t a slight against you.” Oakes swoops his long arm backward and places his hand on my lower back to encourage me to keep pace with him.

My body lights up with his gentle contact, as if I were caught in a lightning storm.

“I’ve enjoyed your company,” he adds. “Your energy is a wonderful presence. Besides, I have the honor of keeping you safe until we reach our destination.” When I nod, he pulls his hand away.

An emptiness washes over me with the loss of his electric touch. *Strange*. Maybe I’m far more lonely than I would like to admit.

CROWLAND

WYNSTELLE

*A*s the morning passes, I don't feel the need to fill the time with empty words and awkward conversation. I find we create a comfortable silence between us when there's nothing to say.

I enjoy Oakes' quiet strength and protective presence. We trade smiles when a bird song delights our senses. I point out flower faeries as we walk and list their special traits unique to their kind. When I see a type I haven't seen in person before, I dance with joy. Instead of rolling his eyes at my excitable behavior, he grins in amusement at my happiness.

He recounts a few stories of Elven lore. I'm able to come up with a few tales even he hasn't heard before. Or so he claims.

He's probably indulging me like he might a young child, but I'm fine with him being sweet and showing interest in my words. I don't know his age, so he could be several hundred years old, while I am a mere child in his eyes.

Once the sun reaches its peak, we stop to take a break to sit in the shade on a fallen tree and eat a snack. Oakes offers me some of his cheese and bread. This time, I gladly accept his generosity. It's smart on my part to stretch my resources. Besides, I sense it brings him genuine satisfaction to share with me.

“I’m impressed by your knowledge. It sounds like your keeper provided you with many books.” Oakes raises a questioning eyebrow. “Or she recited to you many of our tales. And you have an exceptional mind to remember so much.”

I smile at his praise. Elves are known for their sharp minds, and I’ve tried to hone mine to match Merlara’s intellect as best I can. “When I was little, she taught me to read by using the old faerie tales. But now, I read whatever she brings home for me.”

“Then you really have enjoyed your time with Merlara?” Oakes asks with a searching look in his eyes.

“I have.” I nod, nervously picking at my bread. “I’m worried the Ryven Court won’t let me return.”

“What if they offered something better for your future?”

I chuckle softly, unamused at his innocently hopeful question. Is he really that naïve to how his kind views my kind? Briefly, I wonder if the elves in Ryven don’t have the same prejudice as the ones in Betonie, but then I quickly shake off that silly idea. “I don’t see why they would. I’m just a human.”

“So what if you are?” Oakes looks genuinely puzzled.

Why does he believe it’s possible for the royal elves to treat me any better than Merlara has? The common elves in my village weren’t even friendly with me.

“I doubt any good will come from this summons. I expect they will ask me to leave Elfhome.” Rubbing my fingers, I note the tiny scars from my metalworking. “I don’t really belong here.”

“Perhaps you are not Elven. Perhaps you were not born here.” Oakes says adamantly, “But you *deserve* the right to stay and be happy. You are a good person.”

I blush at his intensity of his conviction. “How would you know what kind of person I am?”

“I’m sort of an expert on reading people.”

“Oh. Is that your Elven gift?” I ask, excited to know someone with a magical gift. “If it is, what else do you sense about me?”

Oakes stares at me, as if thinking about what to share. My body heats under his scrutiny.

“I sense you put others before yourself,” he finally says.

“You could have guessed that when I tried to let you go on without me, so you wouldn’t get into trouble.” I chuckle, waving him off, realizing he has been messing with me. “And here I believed you had a magical gift. You’re just observant.”

Oakes laughs. “You found me out.”

His booming laughter lightens my spirits. I love the sound of his mirth. It’s a rare thing to amuse an elf to such an extreme.



On the road again, I begin to wish we will never arrive in Ryven. Perhaps we can just walk right past the city and keep exploring. Might Oakes enjoy that too?

The thought is short-lived when a few buildings come into view in the distance, and my heart deflates. Reaching Crowland means I am that much closer to my court appearance, closer to the end of this peaceful walk with a handsome stranger. I am closer to what will probably be the end of my life in Elfhome. Possibly the end of my life itself.

To stay positive, I force my depressing thoughts out of my head. What if the court allows me to return to Merlara? What if everything turns out fine?

But why does it feel like nothing will be the same after this adventure?

“Crowland is a busy market city.” Oakes instructs firmly, “Stay close to me. It would be easy for you to get lost in the crowd.”

“All right.” I shake myself out of my meditative haze.

“I need to make a quick stop here,” Oakes says. “But we will return to the road immediately after.”

Sensing the tension in his words, I ask, “Should I be worried?”

“Just stay close. You don’t need to draw attention because you appear unescorted.”



The city of Crowland bustles with activity. It’s much more lively than Betonie. Merchants and their wares fill most side streets off the main thoroughfare.

Oakes confidently strides down the congested pathways, and the crowd appears to part, as if instinctively making room for his commanding presence. He stops at a couple of food vendors and buys dried fruits and bread—easy traveling foods.

I follow along in his wake, excited to see another town. Crowland must be twice the size of Betonie. It’s filled with more interesting travelers. Fae, of all species roam the market, shoulder to shoulder, shouting to be heard over the other buyers and sellers. There are elves, nymphs, goblins, even a troll.

A pendant catches my eye, and I stop to study the fine metalwork details of a fellow craftsman. When I glance up, Oakes is ten vendors down the road.

I gasp, not wanting to cause any problems with the locals. If someone starts an altercation because I’m an unescorted human, then my chances of staying in Elfhame really might vanish.

To catch up with Oakes, I tuck my arms close so I can easily slip between elves along the crowded street.

I’m taken unaware when a rough hand clasps over my mouth from behind.

“Fresh meat,” a voice wheezes in my ear as he wraps an arm around my middle, trapping my arms to my sides.

Then two other imposing ghouls step in front of me, blocking my view of Oakes. The third drags me away. No one in the crowd seems to pay attention since they are all engaged in bartering.

Will Oakes turn to look for his missing human burden and witness my abduction?

I try to scream, but it only comes out as a muffled cry under the ghoul's hand. Held tightly to the front of its stinking body, the ghoul carries me down a side alley and into an abandoned-looking building. Its companions follow close behind.

Once inside a room with no windows, they slam the door shut and cackle.

The ghoul holding me licks my neck. "A tasty treat."

The other two circle around me, ravenous hunger clear in their eyes.

I kick and thrash with new vigor, landing a blow to one of their stomachs.

With a shove, I land on the ground. Turning to face them, they somehow look more irritated than their hideous faces should allow.

Their combined stink burns my nose and makes my eyes water.

I scoot away from them until my back lands against the wall.

"Don't make a sound, or we kills you *after* we begins to eats you," one ghoul threatens with a rasp in its throat.

Ghouls *only* eat the dead, and I will be killed soon enough, anyway. Ignoring its threat, I scream as loud as I can.

They cover their sensitive ears in pain.

I pull the blade from my pocket, launch from the ground, and charge at the closest ghoul. I attempt to slice at its torso but miss my target as the ghoul darts out of my way, making contact with its arm instead.

“Stop it!” The ghoul knocks me back with a punch to the face.

I tumble across the room, stunned silent. My mouth fills with the metallic taste of blood.

The ghoul turns to its companions. “Haven’t eaten a human in long times.”

“Ages,” the other agrees. “Very rare. Should we wait for it to rot?”

“Too risky. Eat now.”

“Yes,” they all say in unison.

Since I can’t get past them, I brandish my knife tightly in my hand, and wail as loud as I can. “*Help! Oakes!*”

“Shut its mouth.”

“But I like when food screams.”

“Me too, but the cursed elf will hear.” The first ghoul smacks me. Its claws dig in and slice across my cheek.

Another ghoul moves closer to hit me.

I jab my blade into it.

Slammed back for my trouble, my head knocks against the stone wall and stars spark in my vision.

Shocked for a moment, I yell again, for all it might be worth.

A ghoul rakes its claws across my stomach.

Blood instantly soaks through my shredded top. This is a wound I won’t likely recover from. I’m dazed and losing strength fast. The ghoul’s claws’ toxin is already making me sick and listless. I can only mumble my pleas for help now. I hold my forearms tight against the slices on my stomach to stymie the rapid blood loss.

The door behind the ghouls bursts open.

Oakes charges inside with another elf entering behind him, both wielding swords.

The ghouls step back to avoid the elves.

Aided by the distraction and the boost of adrenaline from seeing Oakes, I kick at the closest one's legs, knocking it off-balance.

Oakes uses the opportunity to cut the ghoul in half with one powerful stroke.

It gurgles its last breath.

The other ghouls realize their mealtime is ruined and run, crashing past the elves.

The other elf moves to chase, but Oakes stops him. "Leave them to lick their wounds. We don't need another incident. Not now."

The black-haired elf stops as if Oakes is the authority on the subject and asks, "You all right?"

"Yes." Oakes ushers the other male to the door and speaks in a hushed voice, "Get me a horse. I'll be at the inn."

In response to the overheard request, I glance up as the new elf nods to Oakes.

His black hair falls forward and shadows his violet-color eyes. I find the combination jaw-dropping gorgeous, but I can barely register his striking appearance in my weakened condition.

The new male looks at me with trepidation, as if he were about to bound over to me and sweep me up into his arms to protect me. He wears a concerned look, as if my life means something to him, even though he doesn't know me at all.

I quickly realize I must be imagining that silly fantasy. This is no time to develop another forbidden attraction to yet another Elven male.

However, both of the elves stare at me with inscrutable expressions. It doesn't matter. I'm probably dying before I have a chance to figure out what they think about a strange, tiny mortal such as myself.

The dark-haired elf asks Oakes, “Do you want me to stay until she’s settled?”

“No.” Oakes shakes his head. “I can take care of her.”

My eyes glaze over, and my surroundings begin to fade. My vision narrows onto the two elves. I manage to hold my stomach to prevent all my blood from leaking out, but the moment I move, they will see how badly I’m injured. Will Oakes blame himself when I die? I hope not. He has been too kind.

The violet-eyed male peeks over Oakes’ shoulder and sees the blade still clutched in my hand. “Did *she* slice that ghou?”

If I had been more conscious, I would have tossed the weapon aside before they noticed it.

“Leave it be,” Oakes says to his gorgeous friend.

Reluctantly, the male walks away. His eyes lock on me until he disappears from the doorway.

Oakes hurries over and tucks my illegal blade into his pack. “I told you to stay next to me,” he says, more disquieted than angry.

Still dazed, I slump against the wall and just stare without responding to his admonishment. There’s no point. Everything will be irrelevant soon, anyway.

Blood trickles down my cheeks where my skin was broken by the ghou’s claws. My fists are scraped from fighting back, and my palms are covered in my blood.

Kneeling at my side, Oakes leans in close to assess my injuries. “*Wynstelle?*”

My eyes wander until they perceive his face, and I flinch when I find him so close.

“Stars and stones.” His amber eyes flare with concern. “Where did they hit you?” He glances down at my tiny human body but restrains himself. His hand hovers over my injured cheek, as if he doesn’t want to break me further. “Goddess, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” I raise my hand slowly to touch my face, but he stops me before I reach my wound.

It’s then Oakes catches sight of the blood and damage to my gut. “Oh, *Wynstelle*.” He sounds gutted himself. “I will take you somewhere safe. *Wyn?* Stay with me. I’m going to carry you. All right?” He slings my bag over his shoulder, waiting for my response so I won’t resist.

“I can walk,” I mumble and shuffle my feet ineffectually over the ground. I collapse back against the wall.

“No. You can’t walk. Stop being obstinate.” He states, “I’m picking you up.”

“Fine. Be that way.” I curl into his powerful arms and chest as he carries me down the busy street.

WOUNDS

WYNSTELLE

“*W*yn?” Oakes settles me onto a soft bed.

I rouse with the call of my name and reply with a crooked grin, “Are you trying to insult me?” My voice comes out hoarse from shouting earlier.

He smiles, but there’s no joy in it. “You weren’t answering to your full name.”

“Oh. Makes sense.”

I feel the drying blood caked on my face. The sting from where the claws sliced my cheek makes me wince. I reach up to touch my wound, but Oakes stops me and settles my arms back at my sides. The more pressing injury, the rip over my stomach, screams in protest to the movement.

I glance down at my torn, blood-soaked clothes. Instead of asking how bad the damage is, since I’m not sure I want to know, I survey the cozy room. “Where are we?”

“Crowland Inn.” Oakes brings a bowl of water and a jar of salve to the bedside. “I’m removing your clothes so I can clean and tend to your wounds.”

“I don’t know if I’m worth the effort.” I glance down at my blood seeping into the sheets. “Put me on the floor. I’m ruining the bedding.”

“What? I will do no such thing. Settle down and let me take care of you.” He pushes on my shoulders so I can’t attempt to get up.

Though I don’t think I can move at all.

Oakes tugs on the hem of my long skirt and pulls up. He slowly removes the dress, pushing the material up my legs and over my torso. If this were any other scenario, I might blush, but I don’t think I have enough blood left to do that now.

Carefully, he gathers the fabric from my abdomen and easily lifts me up so he can pull the gown over my chest.

I slowly raise my arms. With one deft hand, Oakes slips the garment off completely.

Feeling exposed, although I have on undergarments, my arms move across my breast binding.

Oakes doesn’t notice my attempt at modesty. He is more concerned with the gruesome gashes across my stomach. “The ghoul’s claws only cut the surface and not into your intestines. A saving grace.”

I look down now. There’s so much blood. It’s a miracle he can tell how badly I am hurt. “Yes. *So* lucky.” I whimper as Oakes inspects the cuts with a prod.

Oakes proceeds to clean my wounds with a gentle touch. Then he washes the blood from the rest of my body and makes certain the injuries are only on my cheek and stomach. His gentle treatment lulls me into a trance and am quickly floating to sleep.

“You can’t travel anymore today,” he announces.

I stir when he applies the stinging salve and finally hear his comment, grabbing his hand, panicked. “I can’t stay here tonight! I’ll never make it to Ryven Court in time. If I’m late, they will be certain to banish me.”

“Do not fret, mighty little mortal.” Oakes strokes my long, brown hair away from my face, calming me. “We will go by a horse in the morning so you can make your deadline.”

“Oh... uh. Thank you.” Why are his hands so soothing? I figure it must be his particular Elven magic.

“How’s your head?” Oakes’ amber eyes study mine. “There’s quite a bump where you knocked it hard.”

“It’s as if there’s fog in my brain. So not too far from my normal.” I chuckle lightly and close my eyes, enjoying his touch, even if it’s only to tend to my wounds. The sensation is electric and warm. After several minutes of his ministrations that seem to go beyond the need to apply the salve, I ask, “Are you a healer?”

“I have a talent for it.”

I think about my keeper Merlara when she heals my cuts and burns from the foundry. “Merlara healed me sometimes. She would just place her hand on my forehead. It’s not like your touch at all.” I blush. Maybe it’s just my attraction to him that makes his touch feel different.

“Magics work differently. Many elves have some limited ability to heal others. It sounds like your keeper was focusing and encouraging your body’s own healing abilities.”

I feel another surge of his energy pouring into my body, and my breath hitches.

Oakes smiles, obviously knowing the sensation caused. “However, I’m gifting you my magic for your recovery, not drawing on your own systems.”

“Oh.” I prefer Oakes’ electric touch. “It feels like... you are knitting me back together.”

“That’s my intention.” He stops to inspect my injuries again, looking a bit confused. “I was worried your mortal body wouldn’t respond to my magic, but the wounds are closing quickly.”

“Is that odd for me to be able to accept your magic?” I ask. “You seem unsettled by it.”

Oakes’ eyes snap up to meet mine. “No. Not unsettled—relieved. I’ve never used my gift on a mortal, and I didn’t know how your body would react to mine.” Then his voice

drops as if he's just thinking aloud. "But now, I'm more concerned about your concussion and neutralizing the ghou's toxins. I'm sorry that I know so little about human frailties."

"Don't be sorry. Why would you ever *need* to know?" I scoff at his irritation at his own perceived shortcomings. "It isn't like you knew you'd meet a mortal on the road, and I would be injured."

Oakes grimaces. "Well, I should have noticed you were lagging behind at the market. One second you were there and then you weren't."

"It's my fault. I didn't think looking at a pendant would almost kill me." I shrug and then regret the movement when my fresh scars pinch. "As far as my *mortal frailties*, I know a bit about that. When I was growing up, I had a concussion once when a wood crate fell on my head. Merlara says humans need rest and monitoring to make sure the symptoms don't get worse."

Oakes nods with understanding. "So similar to elves. Do you feel dizzy or nauseous?"

"No."

Oakes hums approval. "Good response time and no slurred speech. I believe you will be alright, but I need you to tell me if you notice any symptoms. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

His deft fingers trace my cheekbones, and my face tingles where the cuts on my cheek are. I feel them seal up and then his fingers trail over the closed wound. His eyes stare intently at my mouth, and his thumb brushes over my bottom lip.

Was I injured there? The warm pad of his thumb on my sensitive flesh excites me more than it should. Then his hands slip down over my throat and I somehow resist squirming.

"Do I have bruises there?"

"Hmm?" Oakes eyes snap up to mine. "Yes, some. I hate seeing you hurt."

My whole body is coming alive to vibrate with an energy that I know is caused by my interest in him. I must stop it before I make a fool of myself. “You don’t have to waste your magic on minor things.”

“I need us to keep physical contact so that my magic will continue to mend you, especially your insides. It means that I will need to sleep with you.”

I gasp, and my eyebrows shoot up. “*Sleep with me?*”

Oakes chuckles. “You *slept* with me last night.”

“But... but you were across the room.” I pull away, tightening my arms over my chest. “You weren’t touching me... and I wasn’t *undressed!*”

“I will do nothing more than hold and heal you. I touched you more intimately when I was washing off the blood than I will when I sleep next to you.” Oakes frowns, as if I’m being absurd in my protest. “Do you think I would take advantage of your ill health?”

“It’s just... I... we...” I blush and then whisper, “No. Of course, I don’t think you would do *that*.” He couldn’t possibly want to have sex with a human.

“Well then, unless you have any more objections to my offer to heal you, we could both use some rest.”

I nod, realizing how silly I sound, objecting to his obviously non-sexual contact. Oakes plans on healing me, nothing more. He is only doing this because he feels guilty after he promised to keep me safe.

Oakes removes his blood-stained shirt and uses the wet cloth to wash some of my dried blood off his beautiful body.

As much as I try, I can’t wrench my gaze away from the hypnotizing sight of his ripping muscles on full display. Somehow, I manage to keep my mouth shut instead of letting it hang open in awe. Never has a male’s body enticed me like this before, but he is a beautiful example of Elven physique—half-naked, right in front of me.

My nerves get the best of me when I imagine him pressed against my exposed skin for hours.

Then he crawls into the bed with only his pants on and reaches out for me.

It's all too much for me to handle. I never had to squash my desires like this before. Where am I supposed to put my hands? Is it ridiculous to ask?

He settles his head on the pillow

My breathing quickens as he pulls me into his embrace, which feels more like a lover's.

My voice cracks. "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking care of you." Oakes brings my body to lie over his chest, so the healing cuts on my stomach make contact with his skin. He rests my wounded cheek on his upper torso. Then he pulls the blanket over to cover us both. His electric healing touch now streams throughout my body as he holds me close. "Relax, let me in."

I shiver at his words. Why do they sound so potent?

His hand cradles my face to his broad, muscular chest. The other rests over my waist.

For my injuries, I remind myself.

But *stars!* Warm energy concentrates between my legs. Does he know how he is only stoking my desires with his touch and his words about letting him in?

Suddenly, I come to my senses and realize he does not know what I'm battling inside my heart and loins. My body flushes with embarrassment. I have never had this much contact with *anyone*, not even with Merlara. Then this attractive elf I have known for only a day has placed my practically naked body in full contact with his entire magnificent body.

I grow tense. What I feel is wrong. Forbidden. He doesn't even know how I'm responding to his innocent touch. It's shameful for me to have these desires for an elf.

Am I taking advantage of him?

Pushing away, I blurt out, “You shouldn’t—”

“Help you?” he interrupts and tightens his hold, not allowing me to move.

“No. Touch like this,” I protest.

“Why shouldn’t I touch you like this?” Oakes asks, then eases his hold on me slightly. “Am I hurting you?”

“No. It’s not that.”

Oakes pauses. I can almost hear him thinking.

“But I’m not doing anything unseemly,” he says in a reassuring voice.

Yet, I know I am unseemly. I’m a deviant.

His hands press me closer. “Are you nervous because you don’t know me well?”

“I...” I can’t confess what I am.

“I won’t do anything you are uncomfortable with. Understand?” he asks. “Are you alright with me continuing holding you to heal you?”

I close my eyes to force a calm to come over me. “Yes. I’m just all...” I wave my free hand chaotically in the air.

“I know. What you’ve been through, it’s a lot. You’ve faced death twice now, being on the road.”

“I think I bumped my head too hard,” I say. Perhaps that’s what’s wrong with me and why I’m having these unusually sexual thoughts.

“Speaking of which... How’s your head?” he asks.

“Uh, still foggy.”

“Your body is very tense,” Oakes assesses. “Be honest. Do you truly want me to stop healing you?”

“I don’t want you to stop, but...”

“You aren’t used to being around strangers,” he finishes for me when I can’t.

“Yeah.” I relax. The statement is accurate enough. Remembering this is just a healing situation, I push my yearnings aside and nuzzle into his chest, then suck in a breath at the residual pain in my cheek.

A growl rumbles deep in his chest. “I should have been more alert.” His voice is tight with self-loathing. “These injuries are my doing.”

“It’s the ghouls’ fault,” I argue. “And mine for lagging behind.”

Oakes takes a deep breath, as if making peace with my statement. His hands stroke the small of my back. “Wyn... *please* accept my healing magic. I want to make amends for my neglect.”

I realize somehow I must have been blocking his healing in these last few minutes while trying to lock down my forbidden lust. Relinquishing my defenses, I open myself up to his magic again. I convince myself I can enjoy his touch, even though I shouldn’t enjoy it nearly as much as I do.

Since childhood, I have known very little affection. The tenderness from this male is more akin to what I understand of Elven mating, but it’s ridiculous to consider that he might be interested in mating with a mortal. His reassurance of his honorable intentions calms my wild imagination that he could desire me at all.

During my teenage years, I heard talk about mating. Merlara explained adults find sexual pleasure with each other and that sometimes, this leads to creating offspring. She warned me I was not allowed to have this with the fae.

Humans must *only* mate with other humans.

When Merlara noticed my developing fantasy of returning to the mortal realm and finding a mate, she cautioned me: “Most human men are indifferent to the woman finding pleasure with them. They rarely take the time needed to please a woman. Many men *steal* their own pleasure, *taking* a woman even if she has no interest, often hurting her. And that hurt

usually gives those types more pleasure. These same men have been known to beat and kill women.”

After that talk, it successfully put me off on the idea of sex or finding a mate. Though now, in Oakes’ arms, I feel safe and cared for. I wonder what finding pleasure with a loving partner might be like. Not all human men are wicked, are they? Maybe there are more good men than Merlara realizes.

I almost died twice in the last two days. After having this small taste of affection, I worry I will die without ever knowing any pleasure.

During the night, I wake to find I’m still nestled to Oakes’ side, my leg draped over his thigh. His muscular arm is tucked under my neck. Being entangled with him feels so intimate that I flush with embarrassment.

When I wiggle to move away, he brings his hand up to clasp my head to his chest, making me feel protected in a way I have never known.

His other giant hand splays out over my low back, pressing me closer again. I allow myself this moment to imagine I am precious to him. It’s an unfamiliar experience to feel treasured, even if it is all in my mind.

I hear his breathing quiet and slow, telling me he has dozed off again.

Inhaling deeply, I smell Oakes’ woodsy and sweet maple syrup scent. It’s comforting and slightly intoxicating. I have a strange urge to lick him to see if he tastes sweet, too, but I stop myself from doing it. What has gotten into me?

Feeling more like my healthy self, I surrender to Oakes’ insistence to heal me and snuggle into his arms.

Then curiosity takes over, and I want to know what it feels like to run my hand over a male’s chest. Not just any male’s chest, but *his*. My hand vibrates where it makes contact with his side. Is he like that... *everywhere*?

Slowly, I explore the smooth skin over his muscular stomach, trying not to wake him. His entire body seems to buzz with electric healing, not just his hands.

Again, there's a throbbing between my legs. Instinctively, I shift my hips to press the center of my need against his thigh. It's only a slight relief.

Oakes stirs awake. "Wyn?"

I don't move or answer. I have been caught molesting him and tempting myself with forbidden desire.

"Wyn?" Oakes asks again, and I grunt as if just waking. "Your breathing is shallow, and your pulse is too fast." He moves his hands up and down my body to sense my ailment.

I wiggle away, since he's only making my cravings more intense. His hand cups my hip and keeps me pressed to his thigh.

"Is your head bothering you?"

"Yes?" I answer quietly, feeling guilty for touching him while he slept. Can a mortal die from embarrassment? I then realize I still have my hand on his washboard abdomen. I jerk my hand off his torso as if it were burning in a caldron and I try to pull away from him.

Oakes catches me before I move too far, and he holds me close. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," I squeak. Will he punish me for my forwardness?

"Why are you sorry?" His sleepy voice rumbles through his chest.

"I was... *touching* you." Quickly, I add, "I shouldn't have... I didn't mean to... I'm sorry."

"You are absorbing my healing. Don't be shy." Oakes replaces my hand back on his chest, over his heart. "My body is yours."

My breath catches in my throat with his comment.

With his hand still on my side, his thumb brushes lazily over my skin.

After a moment, I melt back into him. He probably thinks nothing of this non-sexual contact, realizing elves are often free with their bodies. Does he know how much of his body I want to touch? I bite my lip, reminding myself elf-human relations are taboo. Does his healing push the line of morality?

“It’s all right. I got you,” Oakes reassures me. He stretches his large hand across my lower back, pinning me close and flooding my senses with another surge of healing energy.

Taken over by the pleasurable sensation, I hum with contentment and fall asleep.

ARRIVAL

WYNSTELLE

*J*ust before daybreak, Oakes slips out of our healing embrace and leaves me alone in the bed.

Exhausted, I barely stir and only wake when Oakes returns to our room. “Where have you been?” I ask, wiping the sleep out of my eyes.

“I secured our horse.” Oakes sits down gently on the edge of the bed without jostling me, which should be an impossible feat considering his huge frame.

Elves, I envy their grace. Leaning closer, he palms my chin, leans in, and studies my eyes for clarity. He’s so close, I would barely have to move to kiss him. Would his lips taste as good as they look?

In response to his intense inspection of my eyes and face, I avert my gaze. I gingerly stroke my stomach along the lines of scars where my wounds have sealed.

“May I?” Oakes holds the edge of the blanket and waits for me to nod in approval before pulling the cover down to reveal my nakedness and inspect my stomach’s injury. Then he presses his fingers over the previously damaged area.

My arms automatically cover myself over my breast-band.

“Does this hurt?” he asks without seeming to notice that I cover my body.

I admonish myself. Why *would* he notice a mortal?

Swallowing down my silly thoughts, I admit, “It’s pretty sore, but the sharp pain is gone.”

“Good enough for now.” Oakes smiles and brushes his deft fingers over my cheek. “You still have some light scarring. The ghoul’s toxins made the injury more resistant to repair. I can try to fix that for you now.”

My heart pounds in my chest with his gentle touch, caressing my face as a lover might.

“No. Thank you for the offer, but I don’t care about scars.”

Oakes cups my cheek to make me look at him. “Are you sure?”

I fight the urge to lean into his healing hand. “It’s more important that I get to Ryven today. I’m alive, and I’d like to keep it that way by making my appointment.”

His brow creases at my comment. “Do you truly believe they would kill you for being a bit late?”

“I would like to think not, but I don’t want to test the court.” I lightly run my finger over my stomach’s scars. “From what I understand, royals do not like being disobeyed.”

“True enough.” He clasps his giant hand over mine, engulfing my tiny one. He squeezes in a show of comfort. “Are you sure you feel ready to ride?”

“I’m much better. Hungry, actually.” My eyes search the room for my pack.

“Let’s eat downstairs and then head toward Ryven.” Oakes helps me out of bed. He picks up the damaged, blood-stained dress and frowns. “Do you have a change of clothes in your pack?”

“Yes, but I’m afraid I might damage my dress before my court appearance. I was going to change when I arrived in Ryven, so I looked presentable.” I reach out to take the old tattered dress from his grasp.

Instead of handing it over, he helps me slip the damaged, stained dress over my head, then places my cloak on my shoulders. Slowly, he buttons my cloak's closures to hide the mess.

Guilt riddles his beautiful face, and I almost reach out to caress his cheek. I'm not sure where this boldness comes from. Why does it feel like I'm allowed to touch him?

"Don't worry." I pat his hand, turning away to pick up my pack. "The cloak will cover up my damaged clothes until I get to Ryven."

As I turn back, Oakes pulls my small dagger out of his bag.

My eyes widen, remembering that he caught me with the weapon. "I didn't mean... I was only... I wouldn't hurt anyone who wasn't attacking me. And *never* an elf. Please..."

Oakes ignores my explanation and slips the blade into my cloak's pocket. "I won't tell anyone," he reassures me. "The road is dangerous. Having it has helped you to save yourself."

I'm stunned by his actions. I vow to him, "I swear I will do anything to keep you from getting in trouble over me if I get caught with it."

Tears well in my eyes. He's so much more understanding than I expected.

In the tavern, we each order a plate of eggs, freshly baked bread, and roasted vegetables.

I pull my money purse from my pack.

"I'm paying for this meal," Oakes states firmly.

"I can pay," I protest. "You have already paid for a room *and* a horse because of me."

"Had I kept a better eye on you, you wouldn't have been injured." Oakes grits his teeth but speaks softly. "I promised you a safe passage to Ryven, and I failed."

I pat his arm, craving contact with him again already. Then I push two coins toward the innkeeper for the meal fee. “I appreciate your help, but I’m *not* your responsibility.”

Oakes nods, but something in his eyes shows his frustration with my claim.

The innkeeper raises an eyebrow at our interaction but leaves without comment.

A moment after our meals arrive, a male elf wanders by our table, staring daggers at me. I don’t notice the male’s attention much since I have grown up with unwanted stares until the elf mutters, “*Fecking dirty humans.*”

Oakes growls at the male.

The elf stops when he notes Oakes’ hostility and asks, “What’s *it* doing in here?”

“Keep moving.” Oakes waves him off. “There’s no law against an establishment serving a mortal.”

Hurriedly, I shovel my food into my mouth, barely chewing. I don’t need a fight to break out over my presence. That sort of thing will seal my future with the courts. “It’s fine. I’m done. I’ll meet you outside,” I mutter to Oakes as I stand up and head to the door leading to the street.

I move so fast that Oakes watches from the opposite side of the table, confusion filling his face.

When it dawns on him I’m leaving, he calls out, “Wait.”

In two strides, the rude elf sneaks up on me and trips me from behind.

I face-plant on the floor with a loud thud. The room echoes with snickering and outright laughter.

As I try to get up, the elf kicks me in the side.

I curl up and am about to plead for him to stop, when the bully is tossed through the air. I turn to see the violet-eyed elf from the day before as the cause.

He glances down at me, then charges at the recovering elf, shoving him against the wall.

Oakes snatches me up into his arms like a doll pinned to his side and carries me outside.

“Was that your acquaintance from yesterday?” I ask, trying to peer over Oakes’ broad shoulders. “Where did he come from?”

“He walked in right as the male attacked you.”

“Oh.”

“I was too slow to realize what was happening,” Oakes growls.

“Well, in hindsight, I shouldn’t have run out like that.” My face flushes with embarrassment as Oakes parades me down the street in his arms. “I can walk.”

He ignores my claim and hurries to the stables. Without missing a beat, he sets me on a horse in one of the stalls. “We should go.”

Oakes has already saddled it, probably from when he ducked out earlier.

“I didn’t mean to cause a scene.” I rub my bruised elbows from the fall and wince with the sharp pain in my side from the kick. “You should go help your friend. Don’t worry about me. What if others attack him for helping a mortal?”

“I’ll worry about you as much as I please. And you didn’t cause anything. It was just ignorant prejudice on that elf’s part. He shouldn’t have attacked you.” Oakes huffs out his anger. “Oh, and my friend will handle that fool and any others. Don’t you worry.”

I wonder why the mysterious male keeps appearing at critical moments. “Does your friend live in Crowland?”

“He’s passing through, like me.” Oakes’ lips tighten as if he doesn’t want to talk anymore.

“Are you alright?” I ask. “If helping me is too much, I can go on my own. I’m sure I’ve already lost any chance of staying in Elfhome if word travels to the castle about the incidents concerning the *mortal* on the road.”

Oakes holds my hand and stares up at me with his amber eyes, imploring me to hear him. “I’m taking you the rest of the way. End of story.”



I ride in front of Oakes on the saddle. His muscular arms wrap around me, bracing me safely so I don’t fall. The heat from his body keeps me warm and feeling more protected than I’ve ever felt. When we part ways in Ryven, I will miss the security and connection I find with him.

The sensation of his body rubbing and shifting against my backside is almost too much to bear. Yet, I want more. He has awakened something primal in me, and I fear I won’t be able to quiet it now.

“Does that sort of thing happen to you a lot?” Oakes asks, breaking my lustful thoughts about touching his chest and wondering what his other parts are like.

“I was picked on when I was a child by a few village younglings.” I sigh with the memories of always being an outsider—always shunned. Not that I’m complaining, since I am only alive because of Elven magic. However, only Merlara accepts me as I am. Even that dynamic is limited, and it’s become more reserved now that I’m older. But I suppose the Betonie villagers are used to me now.”

“They weren’t welcoming at first?” His large hand moves to hold me over my belly.

At first, it feels like a comforting caress, but then I feel his healing energy and realize he’s only trying to mend my wounds.

“It depended on an elf’s background how they behaved toward me. If an elf fought in the realm war, they were often distant or abrasive. Those who weren’t part of the campaign were usually nice enough, but not particularly friendly either. I noticed the older I knew the elf to be, the more open they were to my presence. Since they highly respected my keeper in the village, the others likely treated me better than they might

have otherwise. But I rarely left the workshop in the last five years.”

“I’m sorry my fellow elves have been less than hospitable. I understand now why you were wary of me.”

“My interactions haven’t been all bad. There were a few pleasant exchanges too.” I unwittingly lean back into Oakes’ body. “Besides, you have been more than kind and generous to me, making up for some of the prejudice I’ve faced.”

He quiets again, and I relax into our comfortable silence.

However, as we near the Ryven gates, my tension rises. I sense the same from him, but for what reason, I can’t guess. Perhaps he has his own problems in Ryven. Certainly, he can’t have become as attached to his human burden as I have become to him.

Far before we reach the city gates, we both dismount and walk on foot. Oakes takes the reins of the horse. When the guards are in view, he heads toward them without hesitation.

I trail several strides behind Oakes to appear as if I have arrived alone. That way, he couldn’t be implicated in any crimes they charge me with.

Once he realizes he’s pulled ahead, he turns and gives me a sad smile.

The gate guards nod to Oakes as if they know him well. He strides inside the castle’s outer gate without having to answer questions or show documentation, as other travelers just ahead of him were required to do. He must be well known here. Perhaps he works with the guards. He never did tell me what he did in the city.

I present my summons letter, and the guards grant me entry without issue.

Oakes waits on the other side to ensure I am allowed inside the city walls. Standing a few strides away from me now, he points straight ahead toward the castle. “Walk right up to the royal guards there and present your letter.”

After marking the location, I wring my hands nervously. “If I make it back to Betonie, I’ll ask Merlara if she can repay you for your kindness. Where should I send the money I owe you?”

My heart already aches, knowing I will miss him.

Oakes frowns briefly. “You owe me absolutely nothing. If anything, I still owe you. May the fates be with you.” He bows and disappears into the crowd.

My legs long to chase after him, to have one more touch, but I know that isn’t appropriate. Besides, I must suppress all the feelings and desires he has stirred up inside me. Yet, I mourn the loss of him already. My eyes sting with tears that I shouldn’t dare to shed. He’s the first elf to treat me as an equal, and help me with no expectations... and he’s gone from life forever.

Still confused that he believes he owes me something, I frown and glance down at my summons. Now it’s time to see if I will live long enough to figure out what he meant.

RYVEN CASTLE

WYNSTELLE

The enormous and wonderfully crafted Ryven Castle and its grounds seem to cover more land than my entire hometown of Betonie. Turrets and high walls keep out undesirables, such as lowly humans. Within these walls reside the high-born of the already elite elves of the Ryven Kingdom.

Shaking with nerves and fearing what will happen to me, I offer the royal guard my summons at the castle gates. I wish Merlara or Oakes were allowed to accompany me to this intimidating place. But I am alone now and remind myself that I must develop independence quickly since I might be forced back to the human realm after this court appearance.

The tall, stoic guard studies the paper and me for a long while. “Come with me.”

I follow him inside the castle’s main entrance and try not to look shocked at the extravagant decor. Exquisite lanterns illuminate the darker halls with no windows. Huge tapestries depicting ancient fae folk stories hang from nearly thirty feet up and still almost touch the floor. I can’t imagine how old these artifacts are. They are priceless and likely irreplaceable. Pedestals stand between the tapestries, other art and historical pieces presented on them. Old armor from famous battles and warriors, and marvelous sculptures of heroes throughout the ages, line the halls. Ryven’s wealth is blatantly on display. Likely, this is meant to remind visitors, no matter how well off

they are, that they are poor compared to the royals, King Magnus, in particular.

Hurrying to keep up with my escort, I'm winded by the time he comes to an abrupt stop and glares at me.

Then the guard ushers me into an enormous room with several plush couches lining the perimeter. "Wait here until someone calls for you."

"Will I be able to change and freshen up before my court appearance?"

The guard eyes my rumpled look, sneering as he catches sight of my dirty, blood-stained skirt peeking from under my cloak. "Not my jurisdiction. However, I will inform the next guard that you need to clean up."

"Thank you." I bow goodbye.

After being left alone, I wander up and down the length of the extravagant waiting room, admiring the large portraits hanging on the walls. Former and current royals, I surmise. A few I recognize from my historical books. All beautiful Elven specimens, each distinct in their looks and demeanor, which ooze out of the paintings themselves. The art must be imbued with some kind of magic to radiate the actual essence of each monarch.

From my books, I recognize King Magnus with his blond hair and cold, gray eyes. A menacing energy pours out of the painting, and I shiver. From what I sense in his portrait, he is powerful and demanding—unforgiving.

Next to Magnus, a portrait of a male with long, blond locks and stormy-blue eyes catches my attention. It's as if he sees right through me with his gaze. The painting's placement, the last in the row, suggests he's the most recent royal addition. The prince.

There is a gentleness in his portrait that is lacking in Magnus. Not that the prince seems soft, just not as hard as his father. My feet draw me closer to the prince's painting as if he has called to me. I clasp my hands together so I won't be

tempted to touch the canvas. His intense gaze seems to follow me when I back away and settle on a couch across the room.

What is wrong with me? First, I find Oakes attractive, then his mysterious violet-eyed friend, and now a prince?

Merlara would probably blame my human biology, coming into mating season. Maybe that is true in a sense. I know humans often find their mates by my age or younger. Perhaps it's that yearning for bonding that triggers me to find these three forbidden males appealing.

Will the prince attend my court appearance? I'm not sure I could take my eyes off him if he did. If so, then it's best he doesn't show. I had a hard time thinking straight around Oakes. And the prince is not only stunningly handsome but royalty. Likely, I would be a bumbling fool. Then he might judge me as worthless and boot me out of Elfhome. All because I'm not used to being around attractive males.

After an hour of waiting, I slump down into one of the oversized couches. The last few days have exhausted me.

As I close my eyes, I vaguely hope they will let me clean up and change my dress before they determine my fate. But I let go of my worries, and soon, I am asleep.

I dream I hear males whispering and arguing inside the room. Then, just as suddenly as it starts, the bickerers vanish. My weird dream drifts on.

A loud clack of the door wakes me, making me jump off the couch.

"Come with me." A female Elven guard stands a few paces in front of me, looking perturbed. She leads me up a flight of stairs and down a long corridor. By the time we finish our lengthy walk, I am in an entirely different wing and a more private section of the city-like castle.

This new location puzzles me. I'd assumed they would hold my court appearance near the front of the castle, to minimize the riff raff, like me, deeper access into the royal palace.

The female guard opens the door to reveal an opulent, oversized bathing suite. After leading me inside, she instructs, “You have a half hour to partake of the facilities to freshen up and bathe. When you have finished, I will escort you to your meeting.”

I remove my cloak, revealing my ghoulish-torn, bloodied, and battered clothes also smeared with dirt.

The guard’s eyes widen at the gruesome sight, and before shutting the door behind her, she says, “The clothes you have on are not acceptable. Do you have a change of clothing in your pack?”

“Yes. I have a clean dress.”

“Good. Wear that. After changing, you will leave your bag and possessions with me during your meeting.”

I quickly and efficiently bathe in the hot-springs tub.

Goddess, what would it be like to bask in such a luxury?

I wash away the few traces of dried blood Oakes missed. Drying off with the fluffiest towel I have ever touched, I shake my head that I have never experienced such fine things before. Other than the exquisite blades I help create, Merlara has simple tastes. I have lived comfortably but never experienced opulence.

I slip on my clean dress, noting the silky material hasn’t wrinkled—the reason Merlara gifted me such a rare luxury for travel. Checking my face and hair in a giant full-length mirror, I notice the ghoulish’s faint marks on my face, where I will be permanently scarred. I mutter, “Oh well, who knows how long I have left to live, anyway?” I’m not vain enough to care much about how I look. I just don’t want to be forced to explain my scars to random strangers. It isn’t likely I’ll find a potential mate in either realm, so it hardly matters.

Wrapping my blade in a fine cloth, I tuck it deep into my bag. If anyone finds it, perhaps I can explain it away as an innocent gift for the royals.

I open the door. The guard takes my bag, soiled dress, and cloak, and then allows me to exit the bathing room. With an

exaggerated huff, the guard leads me down an expansive corridor.

My palms sweat. My fate will soon be cast.

The guard stops before a beautifully carved door, but it seems too small to lead to the court.

The elf glares at me. “The prince has requested to see you in these chambers. He’s waiting now.”

“The prince? Chambers?” My eyes widen. “I don’t understand. I thought I was supposed to appear before the royal court.”

“His Royal Highness is *waiting*.” The guard opens the door and nudges me inside with an elbow to the back.

BARTERING

WYNSTELLE

The meeting chamber is dimly lit by the setting sun. Three Elven males stand at the far end of the room, quietly arguing.

Merlara warned me to wait to be acknowledged and never to speak first with any elf, especially a noble. Listening to her advice, I keep my gaze down so I won't offend the prince by staring. Perhaps he will be more kind than I expect his father is. Perhaps if I can show I am a well-behaved servant, he will allow me to return to Merlara.

The door snaps shut behind me. After a tiny jump, I exhale nervously. What is the royal protocol in a situation like this—meeting the prince *privately*? Merlara only prepared me for a court appearance. Should I still wait to be addressed? Should I approach?

The males must have noticed me enter, but none of them bother to greet the insignificant mortal across the room or even glance in my direction.

I don't want to anger them and seal my fate, so I keep my gaze on the floor and wait patiently as they argue with each other. It seems odd they should call for me and speak about another issue which makes me assume the topic is me.

One elf says in a loud hiss, "End this."

Oh, goddess, please no. My fate has been already decided then. Will they kill me? Or just banish me to the mortal realm and allow that fate to kill me off?

I gulp—a bit too loudly.

The three seem to hear me since they all stop whispering, and I feel their full attention shift to me.

I curtsy, eyes still lowered, unable to register what they look like. My face flushes with heat when they continue to stare without acknowledging my presence otherwise.

“Mortal.”

I peek up through my lashes to see a devastatingly handsome blond male in fine garb. The Prince.

Then my breath hitches when I recognize the males next to him—Oakes and his gorgeous friend who fought the ghouls in Crowland.

The black-haired elf’s face is a placid mask, but I sense intense emotion swirling behind his violet-colored eyes. What those emotions are, I cannot guess. Perhaps he’s here to convince the prince to send me away after all the trouble I caused on the road.

I glance again at Oakes, wondering why he is here now. Has he been reporting the secret of my illegal weapon to the prince?

Oakes averts his eyes guiltily. So he saves my life just to condemn me now? It makes no sense.

After taking in their faces, I lower my gaze and clasp my hands in front of me without even daring to make eye contact with the prince.

“Come,” one elf orders.

I take a few shaky steps forward, wondering what nightmare awaits me.

Oakes announces, “Wynstelle of Betonie, you are in the presence of Prince Eldrin of Ryven and Jaden, his advisor of security. And I am Oakes, his diplomat advisor.”

Anger rises within me. What the feck? His advisor?

I dip my head and attempt another curtsy. My confusion stirs in my mind and threatens to make me collapse. Why didn't Oakes mention his connection to the prince? How many times did I mention how worried I was about my court appearance or how they might treat me? He said nothing. Was our entire friendship a joke to him?

"You are the mortal raised in Betonie?" Prince Eldrin asks.

"Yes, sir."

"Your *Highness*," the prince corrects my nervous blunder, but his voice is absent of anger. "Look at me."

"Yes, of course, *Your Highness*." I raise my head slightly so I may match the face with the prince's voice.

I'm right. The prince is the alluring blond elf from the portrait. He stands in the middle, just a couple of inches shorter than Oakes, who stands at his left. The prince's straight, white-blond hair is pulled back in a tie, highlighting his pointed ears. His skin is golden tan, darker than his hair. Attentive stormy-blue eyes send a shiver down my spine. Compelled by his beauty, I want to step closer, just as with the painting, to get a better look.

But I quickly remember my fate is now his to decide, with Oakes and Jaden probably advising him to send me back to the human realm.

The prince says to Oakes, "She is even more vibrant than you reported."

My heartbeat stumbles. Oakes finds me... *vibrant*? I question again what he had been playing at while on the road with me.

The prince asks, "You are of age now? For a mortal female?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"You were a sick foundling cured by your Elven keeper?"

"I was."

“And you wish to remain in Elfhome?”

“I do, Your Highness. I am familiar with the fae realm. Elfhome is the only home I’ve known. I have no memory of the mortal world.”

“Why should I grant your wish? What can you offer?”

I am prepared for his question. “My keeper, Merlara, and her fallen mate, Roul, are honored names among your people. I have a letter from Merlara stating her willingness to keep me as her servant as she needs my help since her mate died. I can offer my hard labor to support the services she provides to your kingdom.” I decide to add a bit of flattery. “Though I understand that just because I’m a trained servant, my skills cannot rival your Elven citizens. I only wish to repay my keeper and your kingdom for my health.” My voice cracks. “However, I have no special talent, no magic, nothing else to offer you.”

“You have *nothing*?” The prince asks, cocking his head. “Not even your body and mind?”

“A useless *mortal* body.” I shrug. “Which I wouldn’t have had this long without the magic of the fae realm.”

“Are you bonded to anyone?” the prince asks.

Taking in his meaning, my eyes dart up in shock. All three males stare at me. My breath comes in ragged when I wonder what this means for me. “I... uh... no mate.”

“What would you offer for the privilege to stay among the fae?”

It’s now I notice I’m not in the prince’s *meeting* chambers. I’m in a *sleeping* chamber. A massive bed is just off to my left.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I blink hard. The prince can’t have meant what I am assuming. It’s taboo for the two species to have sex. Merlara has told me that—consistently—since I hit puberty.

I lower my eyes. “I can’t offer a prince that which he doesn’t already have.”

“I haven’t known a mortal.”

The blood drains from my face and pools low in my belly. I dare to lock onto the prince's gaze. "*What... what do you mean?*" My mouth is suddenly dry.

"I want to know your body."

I instinctively clutch my chest, but my rule-breaking spirit rises, along with the desperate craving that Oakes awakened. "But... we can't."

"*We can't?*" The prince steps closer. His intensity is breathtaking.

My head spins. My breathing is frantic, and I begin to hyperventilate. Elves can easily kill me by simply holding me too tightly. Of course, I had fantasies of being with an elf just last night, but I know that it could never be.

Regardless, my body responds, excited by the idea of his magnificent, powerful hands on my body. Suddenly, there's a throbbing ache between my thighs. If sex is anything like Oakes' electric touch, I want it. I desire to be with a male.

"I wish to see your body." The prince's voice is commanding but somehow pleading. "Do you wish to refuse my offer?"

"*Can I refuse?*" I ask, but I don't wait for an answer. "You just want to *see* my body?"

"I want to *explore* a female mortal's body." Prince Eldrin moves even closer.

I long to have his hands caressing me. I'm certain he only wants to *see* a human body—how we are made. But why the audience? I glance at Oakes and Jaden. Maybe they will touch me too? I'm excited by the idea, but also afraid it would all be too much.

Reading my expression, the prince says with a pointed look, "They are staying."

Wringing my hands, I ask to confirm our deal. "If I agree to this, then I get to remain here in Elfhame with Merlara?"

The prince approaches until he's only a stride away, eyes locked with mine. "If you are open to sharing a pleasurable

experience with me, then you shall remain here.”

Something in his words strikes me as odd, but I can barely focus on anything other than his hypnotizing eyes and exquisitely masculine face. If there is an Elven trick in his deal, I don't seem to care. My body yearns to be touched, craving it more than a starving woman craves a taste of bread.

I imagine his fingers skimming down my skin. I want the pleasure he offers.

I give my agreement with a nod.

“Say it,” the prince orders. When I hesitate, he adds gently, “I will not hurt you, sweet mortal. I expect you will enjoy our time very much. A mutually rewarding exchange, yes?”

Biting my lip, I think to myself, it's just a body, and I do desire to be... *explored*. Elves think nothing of nudity or casual sex with their own kind. I rationalize he can't possibly want anything more from me than to satisfy his curiosity about my body's shape and feel.

Isn't this what I wished for just last night—that I could experience the intimate touch of a male?

I dart my eyes over to check Oakes' expression, but he gives me no urgent look of warning. He kept me alive and safe the last couple of days, and oddly, I still trust him. He wouldn't allow me to be harmed now, would he? I hope not.

Even if this is a poor decision, I don't have many options. I want the prince's touch, and I wish to remain in Elfhome. This could be a positive experience that I will remember fondly as I grow old. I once had the attention of a powerful elf and returned to my home.

“I accept your terms.” I then add, “Your Highness.”

The prince's chest rumbles with pleasure. “Good. Now, remove your clothing.”

My hands shake with nervous energy as I take off my shoes and pull my simple but silky dress over my head.

The tension in the room rises, and not just in my mind.

Oakes and Jaden quickly avert their gaze to the far side of the room, almost with their backs to me. Is this show of privacy for me or for the prince?

I stand in only my underpants since I hadn't bothered with putting my blood-stained breast binding back on after my bath. My full, bare breasts peak and harden with the chill in the room. The throbbing ache between my legs increases as I'm revealed to him.

I pause as I gather my will to expose myself completely to drop my short braies.

With my thumbs ready to slip my underpants to the ground, the prince says, "Wait."

My cheeks redden, essentially naked in front of three fully clothed elves. I press my thighs together to relieve the building pressure within my sex.

The prince quickly closes the distance and his covered chest brushes against my exposed breasts. The fabric is so finely made it feels softer than my flesh, making my nipples pebble further.

I tilt my head up and dare to look at his hungry expression. His stormy-blue eyes are magnetic, triggering all my latent sexual desires. His tongue darts out, licking his lush lips.

I pulse with excitement.

The prince circles around me, sizing up my flanks like meat for dinner while I stand still for his assessment. His hand grazes lightly over my waist, dipping down under the silky fabric of my braies and trailing his fingers over my round buttocks.

I gasp for air, realizing I have been holding my breath.

Coming back around to my front, the prince squeezes my curvaceous hips with both hands. He gently trails his fingers up around to the sides of my breasts, groaning with pleasure. "Your skin is so soft, especially here." With a quick glance to show his intent, he takes a breast in each hand and bounces their weight. He nods approvingly. "Beautiful. So full."

From his handling, my nipples ache for further stimulation. Between my thighs, my sex smolders with his attention.

Prince Eldrin gazes into my eyes and smiles reassuringly. He brushes aside my long hair to expose my delicate neck. His fingertips dance along my throat and jaw, and then his thumb skims my lips. “You are a true beauty.”

When he notes my flushed skin, he runs his thumbs back down and over my peaks. “Open your stance.”

“*What?*” I say before I can stop my mouth. Of course, he wants to see *all* my mortal parts before the deal is done. But how far is he going to take this? How far do *I* want to take this?

I believe my body wants all of it. All of him.

Then I scoff at the idea he actually wants to have intercourse with a human, with *me*.

I move my feet apart.

The prince’s hand slides down under my underpants and between my thighs. I shiver when his fingertips graze my sensitive flesh.

“You like being touched like this.”

I look into his blue eyes but can’t find the words to respond. I enjoy his touch, yet I yearn for more. It never felt like this good when I’ve touched myself there. But that was only to clean my body while bathing.

“Your sex is wet for me already.”

What does that mean?

But as soon as he explores my silken folds, I feel how I have slicked, and I whimper with pleasure. My body relishes his touch. Oakes holding me the night before triggered a longing to be held, caressed. A *need* to be touched like this. It feels so wrong and so right.

“On the bed,” the prince whispers into my ear.

My heart thumps wildly. My mind spins with both confusion and desire. I crawl onto the bed, watching him for

his approval and my next instructions.

The prince's eyes are fascinated by my every movement. When I fall back onto the bed, my body is stiff with anticipation and nervousness.

The prince moves closer to where my feet almost hang off the bed's edge.

Oakes and Jaden are not far behind him, but they continue to turn their attention away from the scene.

The prince reaches up over my body and slowly slides my underwear off. "Open yourself to me."

I slowly spread my thighs so he can peek at my center.

"More."

At his command, I jerk my legs open. His hands grip my inner thighs to hold me wide, even wider than I have moved.

I cry out with the sting. My mind flashes to what Merlara said of men taking and killing females for their own pleasure. What if elves do the same thing?

"Did I hurt you?" the prince asks, looking concerned.

I nod. "My legs are stretched too far."

"Oh. You're not as flexible as elves." He loosens his grip and strokes my skin as an apology, stoking my need again. His fingers trail up to my opening and lightly graze my folds, exploring.

I realize I yearn for him to explore more. There's an emptiness that craves to be filled.

"This human's sex is more flowery than our females." He pauses, considering. "Unless she differs from her kind."

Oakes clears his throat and finally speaks. "I believe it is typical of humans." His body is turned away, facing toward the door, as if he wants to run from the room. "I have read accounts."

Jaden remains off to the side, too. His gaze holds to the far corner of the room as if he is disinterested in the whole

situation. Why do I want their eyes on me? Why do I wish they were also touching me? I've gone completely mad with lust.

With all the prince's gentle attention on my sex, my body responds and throbs with a need I don't fully understand yet. His fingers move over my folds, lubricating me with my own juices. Instinctively, my hips undulate with his strokes.

The prince rims me with his finger but doesn't enter me. "Do human females experience release?"

"Release?" Confused, I glance at Oakes. He seems to be the expert in human anatomy.

"They have orgasms... if stimulated properly." Only able to see the side of his face, I can tell Oakes presses his lips flat after answering.

I wonder why he seems irritated with the thought. Then I realize that he's likely repulsed by the thought of being with a human. My heart drops a bit with the reminder I'm less than in Elven eyes.

"Have *you* ever had an orgasm?" the prince asks, tilting his head in curiosity, now studying my face again.

My cheeks flush pink. "Um. No."

"I can take care of that." The prince's throaty laugh rumbles through his chest. "What do you feel like inside?"

With the idea of being probed, I go still, wondering what it will feel like. My body wants him inside, but my mind feels like this is now moving too fast.

The prince dips inside my core and swirls his index finger. Then he immediately slips another finger into my opening. "So tight."

I gasp at the pinching sensation. I clench the sheets. Will the prince stop if I ask? Or will he continue even if he hurts me? All the fears of males that Merlara drilled into me crash into my thoughts.

In my sudden panic, I'm not sure I want his attention anymore. My hands drop to stop his fingers from entering into

me. The sensations are too much. I'm unable to move under his strong brace.

Oakes snaps, "She's upset."

Jaden growls, and it sounds like a warning. However, I don't know if the rebuke is for me or the prince.

"Are you hurt?" the prince asks as he removes his hand.

I turn my face away from him. I don't want to be weak, especially if I am about to be free to go home.

I *had* enjoyed his attention... until now. Why did it hurt when he entered me?

"I asked you a question," the prince says.

I close my eyes. "Please, Your Highness. No more."

The prince pulls away, recoiling as if I slapped him.

"Humans are fragile, Your Highness," Oakes explains. "She probably fears for her life, being pinned down, thinking all of us will force our turn."

"Mortal, is this true?" the prince asks, disbelief in his voice.

"You said it wouldn't hurt."

His mouth drops open. "I didn't mean... I wouldn't—"

"She's bleeding," Jaden hisses.

How does he know? He hasn't even looked at me once.

"I didn't cut her." The prince's voice is thick with confusion.

"This can happen with human females the first time they are... *penetrated*," Oakes says with irritation.

"Your *first* time?" the prince asks, sounding shocked. He quickly moves away from me with a look of alarm on his face and indicates my discarded clothes. "Jaden, grab her dress and shoes. Place a guard outside. Oakes, deal with... *this*."

The prince races out of the room with Jaden on his heels.

AFTERMATH

WYNSTELLE

Left alone with Oakes, I abruptly scoot away from him and pull the blanket up to cover my nakedness. I don't think I can trust him anymore. He lied by omission during our time together.

Oakes frowns and scans my now covered body.

“What did he mean about *dealing* with me?” My eyes widen in fear. “Are you going to kill me now?”

“*Stars*, no.” Oakes reaches out to comfort me, but I flinch, and he quickly withdraws. “Prince Eldrin wants me to console you so you won't run away.”

“He's not done with me? I let him explore me—*all* of me!” I pull myself into a ball. My anger rages that the prince isn't going to hold up his end of the bargain. Fae are known for deals, and I believed I negotiated properly. But now, he wants more. It isn't right.

I turn my frustration to the one I can yell at right now. “Why didn't you tell me you worked for the prince?”

Oakes drags his large hands through his silky brown locks before answering. “He sent me to investigate you covertly and discover what you were like before you arrived.”

“This has been a game all along. Our friendship was never real.” My eyes narrow on him. “So you told him I would be a good plaything?”

“I didn’t want this for you!” Oakes shakes with frustration and his hands clench into fists. “When I arrived, I told him you were *not* what we expected. I recommended he should allow you to stay with Merlara.” He turns away. “Humans have always fascinated him and I hoped he only wanted to ask a few questions. However, upon seeing you while you slept in the gathering hall, the prince decided he desired to *know* you.”

“Will he let me live after he’s *done* with me?” My demeanor wilts with the idea I might not survive the prince’s whims. “He was angry with me when he left.”

“He’s not angry at you. He’s angry with himself and probably with me.” Oakes frowns and says, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were a virgin. I just assumed you weren’t completely comfortable being in the bed with me, a stranger, while you were injured, not that you had never been in a bed with a male. Wyn, please know that I advised against his deal making even when I believed you had experience. Now he’s embarrassed that he pushed you when you didn’t fully understand what he wanted from you.”

I process his statements and wonder about Oakes’ concern. “When I met you on the road, you never really cared whether I lived or died, did you? I was just an assignment—a job. When you held me... I was just a joke to you.”

“Untrue! I care for you more than I ever expected. I want —” He stops, bites his lip in frustration, and then says, “I never want to see you hurt.”

I pull away further when he reaches out and looks as though he means to comfort me. “No. You already have hurt me by not telling the truth about who you are.”

Oakes sighs. “I never meant it to end up like this. I *wanted* to tell you.”

I glare at him. Elves aren’t known for outright lies, though skirting or withholding the truth is another matter. Sure, maybe he wanted to tell me, but it changes nothing now. I am at the mercy of these elves and their whims. “How long will he keep me in this room?”

Oakes' massive shoulder slump. "I don't know." His resigned demeanor makes me realize he really doesn't want any of this to happen. He explains further, "The prince is only sixty years old. He's young and brash."

I snort derisively. "He would be an old man if he was human."

"Perhaps that's the advantage of a shortened lifespan. One matures faster. He is the equivalent of your age in Elven years, just coming into adulthood. Although I would argue you are still more mature from what little I know of you."

I shake my head in disbelief. I'm naked in the prince's chambers, arguing with his advisor. As much as I try to deny it, Oakes still has a soothing effect on me. But how can I trust him after he deceived me? "Can I have my clothes back? My things?"

"I will get them back to you." Oakes rubs his face in frustration. "The prince panicked, but I will talk some sense into him."

My forehead crinkles in puzzlement. "Why did he need you and Jaden as an audience?"

"Jaden and I weren't going to participate in your... arrangement. One of us could have left, but we wanted to make sure, as a human, you weren't accidentally harmed by the prince's, uh, *enthusiasm*. Unfortunately, it still went too far since you didn't know what you agreed to." Oakes stands and paces the room. "The prince isn't often challenged to think of others' feelings. So try not to take his actions personally."

"Wouldn't *you* take it personally?" I pull myself tighter into a ball. "Merlara warned me that human males *take* what they want from females. I should have realized elves would do the same and manipulate to get what they want, too." I turn away from Oakes. "I gave him what he asked for so that I could be free. I want to leave now."

"He didn't mean to take your innocence. Trades and favors such as this are common and mutually satisfactory

arrangements in the capital, especially with the royals. You must know this.”

Oakes is correct. This is the way of the realm, but I no longer want the prince to explore my body.

“I know elves are often uninhibited with their sexuality. But I didn’t expect him to... you know. It was overwhelming. And it’s just...” I nervously pick at my fingernails. “When you were healing me... your gentle touch made me think *I* could experience pleasure. So I suppose I said yes to the prince because I wanted to explore that feeling. To know pleasure...” I sigh, feeling stupid at my confession. “But what choice did he really give me? My freedom in exchange for his *exploring*. It seemed like a deal I could live with.”

“But you didn’t know exactly what you were saying yes to.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t fully, no. Besides, my keeper told me to say yes to whatever the royals asked of me, so I did.” I bite my lip, tears threatening to fall. “Can you tell me... does the prince even have the power to let me stay?”

“Yes. Prince Eldrin has the power to do with you as he will. He is a powerful autocratic with an attitude, but he isn’t a monster. If you had refused him, he would have allowed you to stay in Elfhame *with* no sexual favors. He truly believed that you would enjoy yourself like all his other sexual encounters. His proposition wasn’t malicious, but it *was* thoughtless to someone in your position, an innocent, worried about your future. I’m not dismissing your feelings, but he stopped when he realized you no longer wanted his touch. I don’t believe he would have offered the trade if he thought you weren’t aware of his intent and weren’t fully agreeable to his expectations.”

His explanation makes me feel less angry with them. Except now I feel a bit of a fool for saying yes.

“Can you explain to him I don’t want to participate anymore in this... *deal*?” I glance at the door. “I will understand if he wants to punish me for changing my mind and to send me to the human realm.”

Oakes nods. "I will inform him of your request, but I expect he will want to make this right for you."

THE PRINCE

OAKES

“*I* blundered with the mortal,” Prince Eldrin says dejectedly when I enter his private chambers. His hair looks as if he’s pulled on it. Stray strands are loose from his hair tie. His face is in his palms. He appears utterly mortified.

I’m glad, because he should be.

I’m still reeling with my own emotional response to the scene I just witnessed. I want to tear into the prince. I imagine slamming him against the wall and knocking some sense into him. Into both of us.

I’m just as angry at myself for misreading Wyn’s sexual interest. Chastising myself, I wonder: *How could I have missed that she was a virgin?*

She was hesitant about my healing touch at the inn, but I wrote it off as her feeling vulnerable being near a virtual stranger after her ghoul attack. During the night, she had run her small hand over my chest and pressed her sex against my thigh in need.

My blood pumps with the memory, but I push it aside. I need to fix this *blunder*, as Eldrin puts it.

Wyn drew me in the moment I caught sight of her. I’ve never felt this way before about a female. If it weren’t for

Eldrin's possessive interest, I would have pursued my attraction to her before we reached Ryven.

Right now, though, I have to clean up this mess we've made.

Adept at reading the prince with my powers, I sense how awful Eldrin feels about upsetting Wyn. However, I'm surprised by the prince *admitting* the mistake. Although if Eldrin were to open up to anyone, it would be to me.

"Wynstelle has lived as an indentured servant," I explain. "Her keeper doesn't seem to have abused her, but Wynstelle mentioned she was often alone. On the road here, I found the human was feisty. I assumed she had more life experience than she did. That she was more aware of our ways. Having her first sexual... *encounter* this way is quite a lot, even if she initially thought she could handle it or wanted it."

"She is an *innocent!*" The prince rubs his face in agitation. "Or *was!* I'm not used to females without experience. She is so beautiful, I assumed several elves in her town would have been with her. I believed she fully understood the bargain we struck. I wouldn't have put such a lovely female in that position if I had known. I scented her arousal, did I not?"

"You did," I say with a sigh. "But she wasn't ready for... this. I now understand her keeper, Merlara, instilled fear in her about sexual relations. Merlara convinced her that most males take females without permission. Perhaps if she knew it might sting the first time she was entered, then she wouldn't have been afraid."

"I did exactly what the mortal feared! I *took* from her." Distraught, Eldrin jumps up and paces the room. "Curse me! Have I ruined her future happiness?"

"I can't answer that question with any certainty, but she seems like a resilient soul. Perhaps we can gain her trust." I add, "I hope to reassure her that my deceit on the road here was not my usual way. Wynstelle hasn't had many positive experiences with elves outside of her keeper since Merlara had limited her exposure to our realm."

Eldrin pauses his pacing and asks, “But why did this Merlara keep a mortal so isolated?”

“Control? Protection? I’ve found on my way here that many elves aren’t open-minded about mortals inhabiting our realm. They still hold prejudice from the war.” I shake my head. Trying to appease Eldrin’s vulnerability, I ask, “Would you appreciate my advice?”

Eldrin quiets and straightens. “Yes, I value your input, especially with this.”

“If you pursue any further contact, take your approach with her slowly and gently. She has emotions like us, though perhaps more intense. She *wants* to experience affection and pleasure. But I believe she also needs to feel safe, appreciated, and heard—something she has had little of in her short life. And you should excuse her from your arrangement.”

Eldrin shakes his head slowly, resisting the advice. “But I want her to stay here.”

“Then match her pace and be aware of her boundaries,” I suggest, “with no expectations.”

“I can do that.” Prince Eldrin frowns contemplatively. “It’s just that no one seems to have any boundaries around me.”

“You’re the prince.” I smile with a hint of exasperation. “Your people want to please you.”

“I must seem like a selfish bore to you sometimes.” Eldrin raises his eyebrow, daring me to agree with him.

“Never a *bore*,” I say with a grin.

NOVELTY

WYNSTELLE

The following morning, my chamber door creaks open. I pull the bedsheets to my chin. Not that it will do me much good if the elves want to expose me again.

Jaden enters with a casual and confident stride, stopping in the middle of my bedchamber. His violet gaze scans the room quickly, then lands on me full force.

I suck in a breath. Again, his unreadable expression leaves me with no cues as to how he feels about my presence in the castle. His demeanor is so different from what I remember of him after the ghoulish attack. Then, his expression held concern for me, or so I had thought. Maybe he was only worried that he had failed in his job of delivering the human to his prince in one piece.

I push myself against the headboard, clutching my covers, as if sitting up will make a difference to what he has planned for me. It crosses my mind I might not survive telling Oakes that I rescind my deal.

Will Jaden force me to submit to the prince? Or will he be the one to escort me from the realm? Will he demand his own price?

Jaden was reserved during the prince's explorations, but maybe he wants to continue what the prince had started the day before? Do I want him to, if he could be gentle with me?

The violet-eyed elf stirs my insides, and there's no explanation for his effect on me. Except, when Jaden looks at me, somehow it feels as if he might truly see *me*—not just a human servant. I worry he will not like what he finds—a naïve, fragile mortal.

Easily, he reads my fear. “Settle, it will be alright.”

His reassuring words, with his commanding voice, anchors me immediately, and I let go of some of my tension.

A moment later, Prince Eldrin and Oakes join us in the room. Hesitantly, Oakes carries a bundle and approaches the bed.

Wondering what is in store for me now, I swallow my trepidation and stare at him.

“Mortal—” the prince pauses and corrects himself, “*Wynstelle*. I asked too much of you yesterday, considering you are unversed in the ways of the capital. I assumed—incorrectly—that you'd had prior sexual experiences and were a willing participant in a mutual exchange of pleasure. My curiosity superseded your comfort. Understand, I meant no disrespect. Please, accept my invitation to join me for breakfast so I can begin to make amends.”

I realize that is the best apology I can ever hope to receive from royalty, or even a common elf. I'm baffled he would even offer this for a mortal servant. He could order me to submit, and I would have to do as he commands or die.

“Prince Eldrin has commissioned a dress for your outings.” Oakes' words shake me from my shocked state. He locks his intense gaze on me when I turn to focus on him. With only his eyes and tone, he wills for me to accept the prince's gift and invitation.

I open the bundle and check if the dress is modest before saying, “Thank you for your words, Your Highness. And for a beautiful garment.”

“Of course.” The prince smiles, pleased with himself. “Oakes will escort you to my common dining hall once you are dressed.”

The prince strides out the door. Jaden gives me a lingering glance and follows him.

Oakes turns his back to allow me some privacy as I slip on my new dress.

“Will he let me go home after breakfast?” I dare to hope.

“It is a victory that he asked you to join him at his table.” Oakes tilts his head apologetically.

I frown when I realize the dress laces up in the back, and I can’t tighten it on my own. “I need help with the bodice,” I say with irritation, “But it’s no accident that I will need one of you to get me in or out of this thing, is it?”

“Oh,” Oakes sounds contemplative. “Most of the highborn Elven females that wear such an expensive garment have servants to assist them. We didn’t think of that complication.” He doesn’t look at me, but rushes for the door. “One moment. I will have a female servant assist you.”

“No, please,” I stop him. “It’s fine.”

Oakes pauses and turns to see me fussing with the dress. His smile quirks in a charming way at my frustration. I grimace that I still think of him as charming.

I spin so he can tighten the bodice and pull my long hair out of the way.

The room is heavy with silence, and I can feel his gaze on my exposed neck. After a long pause, Oakes lightly brushes my stray hair away from the lacing.

Goosebumps rise on my skin in response to his electric touch. I don’t want to be attracted to him anymore, but despite his part in the prince’s plans, he treats me better than any other male has. I can’t seem to forget the bliss of sleeping in his arms at the inn.

“I need a hair tie. I lost mine after the ghoulish attack,” I blurt, and finger-comb my wild hair to distract myself from my thoughts about his naked chest.

“It looks better down, but I can find something for it later.” His large hands smooth down the waves I stir up with my

fingers.

I allow him this touch since it feels divine to have someone play with my locks. “I will locate your pack and your hairbrush,” he offers.

“Thank you.” I settle down with the thought of him returning my few possessions. “Did you talk to him about my... contract?”

“Actually, he was concerned by your reaction all on his own and feels horrible for upsetting you.”

Is he defending his prince, or is it true? “How long does he plan on keeping me here?”

“I could not determine that, other than it will be after he believes he has made amends. And after he loses interest in the novelty of humanness.” As Oakes finishes lacing me up, his breath tickles the top of my head. He’s so close, yet my body wants to lean back and close that small distance.

Instead, I pull away and turn to face him. Finding it odd that the prince would even be interested in my novelty of being human, I joke, “So, just be my normal dull self, and I will be out of here today?” I quirk my lips into a playful grin.

“I hate to deliver the bad news, my mighty mortal, but you’re *not* dull.” Oakes smiles as he straightens the sleeves on my dress.

“I bet you say that to all the human slave girls,” I quip, but the humor falls flat on my own ears.

“You are not a slave—” Oakes protests.

“Technically, I always have been. Even after being taken from my keeper, I can’t leave until the prince has finished *exploring* my... *novelty*.” I glance down at my pronounced breasts in the bodice. “Now, at the very least, he wants to satisfy *his* bruised ego. He doesn’t want to feel like he took advantage of my ignorance.”

Oakes cups my shoulders and says earnestly, “He realizes he pushed you too far yesterday.”

I almost laugh at my breasts, *pushed* toward my chin. “But will he push again, only in a sweeter voice?”

Oakes presses his mouth closed, but I sense he isn't irritated with me. We both know that my stint at the castle isn't over yet. Perhaps the prince doesn't have any ill-intent, but he's accustomed to getting what he wants. And right now, for whatever bizarre reason, he wants me.

“Come along,” Oakes says through gritted teeth. “Your new shoes are by the door.”

Servants are placing platters of food on the solid and intricately carved dining table as Oakes and I arrive. I realize how hungry I am when I smell the delicious dishes. The evening before, a servant delivered a plate of food. Though I barely ate any of it, thinking about my folly in believing a sexual experience could ever be pleasurable for me. I'm not compatible with elves, and Merlara told me human men are brutes.

Oakes and Jaden wait for the prince to take the first bite before they begin. Fortunately, I am paying close enough attention to follow protocol instead of digging into the pile of food that Oakes dished onto my plate.

I keep my mouth shut since Merlara informed me to speak only when prompted by royalty. I desperately want to ask when I can leave Ryven, but the prince might keep me longer out of spite for asking such a thing.

“Wynstelle, you have *no* interest in returning to the mortal realm?” Prince Eldrin asks, with genuine interest.

I consider my words, understanding this could be a trap of some sort. “To say I'm not at all curious would be a lie. However, I do not wish to live with humans. The fae realm blessed me with my very life, and Merlara is a kind keeper. It's the only home I've known, and I hoped to live out my days there, helping her.”

“You don't wish to have a family of your own?”

“It was never something I truly considered.” I shrug. “Until my summons, I assumed I would continue assisting Merlara until I died of old age. Hopefully, I wouldn’t become another burden upon her again when I neared my end.”

The prince raises an eyebrow. “It doesn’t sound as if your shortened lifespan bothers you.”

“It is what it is.” I half-smile. “If it weren’t for fae magic, I would have died as an infant. I was a sick foundling, and Merlara nurtured me back to health. The only sadness that I feel is for Merlara’s sake. She will—or would have—watched me fade to sickness again in my old age and then put me to rest.” My eyes well up with tears, thinking of home. Perhaps it’s for the best that she didn’t have to endure my end.

“You miss her.” Prince Eldrin’s eyes soften. “Did she care for you as one of her young?”

I clear my throat. “I suppose she cared for me as much as one can of someone not born of their flesh.”

“Bonds transcend flesh, do they not?” the prince asks.

I’m surprised by his insight. Perhaps he isn’t as clueless as he acted the day before. “Even as an outsider, I would give my life to ensure the safety of Elfhame. I owe Merlara and this realm my existence.”

Eldrin eyes me and takes a few more bites before speaking again. “I underestimated your depth. I’m truly sorry I neglected to see your soul and only saw you for what your body offered me yesterday. I have been known to be too... *focused* when I want something.”

My face flushes pink when both Oakes and Jaden look up to stare at me, wide-eyed, as if I have just done the impossible. I can’t think of a response, and perhaps it’s better if I let his apology be.

Fortunately, the conversation veers to royal responsibilities with Oakes reminding him of the day’s docket. I’m glad to be out of the focus of attention for a bit.

Prince Eldrin sits back in his chair and pats his flat stomach when he’s done eating. “Would you like to join me

for a walk around the estate?”

“That would be nice.” I quickly add, “*Your Highness.*”

“You can address me by my given name, Eldrin, when in a private audience with the three of us.”

I tilt my head in thanks.

Eldrin offers his hand, and I hesitate.

The prince frowns. “I won’t hurt you anymore. I promise.”

I take his hand, and a tiny zap of lightning shoots up my arm. Is that my own residual desire? Or his magic playing with me? Or is it the spark that poets write about for potential loves?

No, I remind myself that love will never be possible for me. If anything, Eldrin will seduce me into a taboo sexual encounter again and then send me away when he tires of my novelty.

That outcome is for another day though. Today, I will enjoy feeling alive and that someone enjoys spending time with me—not just having me do chores.

Eldrin leads me outside to the garden of his castle wing. My eyes widen as I glance back at the castle and then around his private garden. “Is this *all* yours? Oh, I’m sorry.” I clamp my mouth shut and smack my face for good measure, realizing I broke royal protocol.

The prince catches my hand. “Please, don’t hurt yourself on my account, either. Go on, ask me anything and speak freely with me. I want you to be completely honest with me. *Brutally* honest, even.”

“But I’m just a—”

“Guest,” the prince interrupts. “You are my honored *guest.*”

“Oh.” I blush. He really is enchanting when he wants to be. A faint scent of sandalwood catches my attention—Eldrin’s scent.

He cradles both my shoulders, locking me into place with his piercing blue eyes. “We can talk about anything. I would like to know more about you—” I tense, and he quickly adds, “—as a *person*, your thoughts, your emotions, what makes you happy. *This* is what I ask of our arrangement now. Does that sound acceptable to you?”

What will it be like to chat freely with one of the most powerful people in the realms? For a brief time, I can imagine that I’m seen as having the status of a highborn elf. “I accept these terms.”

He gazes into my eyes. “So, what did you want to know?”

I relax under his firm hands, his warmth seeping into my soul. “This castle appears bigger than my entire village. Is this entire section of the castle and grounds just for you?”

Prince Eldrin offers his arm to continue our walk. He smiles happily when I accept by threading my arm in his. “Yes, but it is also for my advisors, staff, and guests.” He nods to the two males. “Oakes and Jaden both have their own private suites. We have created a bond, so when I take over the throne, I will already have trusted advisors and staff at my side.”

“Are they *always* with you?”

Eldrin glances at me, understanding my unspoken question of why they were part of exploring my body. “Yes. Usually, when I’m out of my private sleeping chambers, one of them is with me, acting as my bodyguard.”

“Why would you need a bodyguard?”

“Are you that innocent, or do you overestimate my immortality? I *can* actually die. Royalty does so more often than most.”

“I know elves can die,” I scoff lightly, testing his promise for me to speak freely. “I just thought no one would try to kill *you*.”

“Do you know much about the mortal war?” Eldrin asks.

“Not really. Merlara didn’t talk much about the war. Her mate died shortly after he had rescued me as an abandoned sickling. From what I understand, the war ended around the same time I was brought to this realm. Besides Merlara, the elves in my village didn’t talk freely with me if they were so inclined to reminisce.”

“Well, as for your question. Some elves hate my father for ending the war. So, I am a target by extension.” Eldrin sighs.

“Why would the elves want to continue the death and destruction?”

“Humans had been growing in numbers, and our kingdom suffered for it. They encroached on our territory, and some fae believed we should have killed those humans at our borders and others even called for an annihilation. But my father negotiated with the mortal king, saving us from shedding more blood.” Eldrin shakes his head in disappointment. “The whole conflict drew more blood on both sides than is comfortable for my taste.”

“Agreed,” Jaden says, with what seems like firsthand knowledge. The sound of his voice bolts down my spine. Why are these males affecting me so much?

“I thought the fae and humans existed in different realms, so why would you need to keep the mortals away?” I ask, trying to distract myself from Jaden’s seductive presence.

“Both peoples can’t live in the same space,” Eldrin explains. “The human populations near our cities drain our magic. Then there is the potential thinning and cracking of the veil, which means a greater possibility of either species accidentally crossing over to the other’s realm.”

“What happened during the war that made the mortals stop and compromise?” I ask.

“The humans didn’t want to surrender to our needs even though elves existed first. Humans are stubborn creatures.” Eldrin realizes he is speaking to one of those stubborn creatures. “Of course, I admire that quality.” He smiles apologetically.

With a grin, I venture to add, “And elves have been known to exhibit the same trait.”

“True.” The prince chuckles, then turns serious. “Well, many in the Ryven Kingdom believed we should kill all the region’s humans because neither side wanted to concede.” Eldrin sighs. “There were overwhelming losses on both sides. Finally, my father made a treaty with the mortal king.”

“How?”

“He never speaks of the details. However, I’m sure our superior forces persuaded humans to withdraw from most of the areas they had infiltrated. We had to give up very little of our lands as a show of good faith.”

I raise my eyebrows. I know the elves are a force to be reckoned with. I also read that most humans have short lives, but are violent and multiply their numbers quickly. Which means they are a threat in a different way. “Seems your father could have told you the details of the treaty so that you would understand what transpired for when you eventually sit on the throne.”

Eldrin opens and closes his mouth, considering my words. “That is a very insightful point. I *should* press the issue. Although as the king, he is the *epitome* of Elven stubbornness.”

I smile at his jest.

“It lightens my heart to see your genuine smile.”

“Your Highness.” Oakes steps forward. “The court expects your presence by noon.”

Prince Eldrin grumbles. “Of course. Sorry, Wynstelle, they won’t let me play all day long.”

WARNINGS

WYNSTELLE

Eldrin tasks Oakes with escorting me back to my chambers.

After he shuts the door to my room behind him, Oakes warns me, “Be wary of being over-familiar with the prince.” His voice is full of frustration.

“I planned on being careful, but *why* are you warning me?” My eyes narrow on him. “I thought you wanted me to trust him and become his sex toy.”

Oakes grimaces, and I wonder if it’s because of my comment or because he doesn’t want me to feel *obligated* to have sex with the prince.

“Wyn, I *never* wanted you to have sex with him—and definitely not as a toy to play with.” Oakes sighs. “Besides, Eldrin has released you from that agreement.”

“Then what is your point? And why hasn’t he said I can leave Ryven? He *explored* my body, and that was the agreement. He should be done with me. But now, what does he want? Friendship, forgiveness, or something else? I don’t understand what. He says he wants to get to know me. Now, you are telling me to resist.”

“It’s dangerous to get too close to him.”

“Fine. I asked to leave. So why doesn’t he release me? Does it hurt his pride to let me go home at this very moment?”

He must see that I have forgiven him and harbor no ill will.”

I’m conflicted about staying longer and enjoying the company of these three males. Prince Eldrin has been extremely nice since our first interaction, but does he still expect something from me for his kindness? I don’t mind the break in the monotonous and hard life I led. Why shouldn’t I eat some luxurious food and enjoy walks in castle gardens for a few days? Is that so terrible? Am I not worthy of a moment’s reprieve?

“What do you expect me to do?” I ask.

Oakes moves closer, and I tilt my head back to meet his gaze. His fingers brush a lock of my hair from my face and he tucks it behind my ear. He is acting so familiar with me, but I can’t say that I mind the attention.

With a sigh, he explains, “Your uniqueness and intelligence intrigues the prince. He is accustomed to getting what he wants. Eldrin doesn’t see it as a breach of contract to ask you to stay, just a change of its terms. The prince is given a lot of freedom. Too much, some would say.”

“Would *you* be one of them?” I don’t expect an answer.

His face hardens. A stark contrast to the way his hand softly cups my cheek. “There are those in the royal courts, especially in the other kingdoms, that will not appreciate his fondness for you.”

“His *pets* rarely get to call him by his given name?”

“Most *nobles* don’t have permission to speak as freely as you have done today.”

“Oh.” I cover my mouth in awe. I thought his offer was unusual but didn’t realize how much. Why has he given me such leeway? Eldrin wants me to be brutally honest. Maybe he is genuinely regretful that he caused me distress. Maybe he’s trying to be a friend. I have no experience with any sort of relationship—friendship or otherwise.

“You have evoked a need in him to be more considerate, but others might not appreciate you being the one to elicit such compassion.” Oakes clasps my hands in his. “I will do my best

to protect you while you are here, but curtail your liberties in the presence of anyone, excluding Jaden and myself.”

“So I can trust Jaden?”

“You can. But if it comes down to a choice between our prince or you, unfortunately, we have sworn our lives to him.”

“All right. I understand. I don’t want anyone to choose, and I never would expect my life to be worth more than a prince.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. Your happiness is all I can think about.” Oakes strokes my cheek. “And on that note, don’t fall in love with the prince. He will only break your heart.”

I step away from his comforting touch. Anger rises in me.

Again, Oakes reminds me how little I really mean to them. My voice has an edge when I say, “I know better than to grow attached to *anyone*.”

Oakes’ jaw tightens, and his eyes dart away. “Yes. Of course. You aren’t, as you say, *stupid*.”

“Contrary to popular belief.” I stare at the door and decidedly not at Oakes. “Aren’t you joining the prince at court?”

It’s apparent I’m dismissing him, and his eyes widen with my assertiveness. “Yes. I will send a servant to deliver whatever you need. *If* I have time, I will check on you before the day is done. Or perhaps I should send Jaden instead?”

“Whatever you need to do.” I grab the book I had been reading earlier, curl into the window seat, and open the novel. “I’ll just be waiting here for whoever wants to play with my emotions next.”

“*Wynstelle?*” Oakes says with a touch of hurt.

I don’t respond other than a huff, and his head droops as he shuts the door behind himself.

BLADES

WYNSTELLE

A few hours after Oakes leaves, there's a knock at the door. Without enthusiasm, I ask, "Who is it?"

"Jaden."

I recognize his rough, deep voice. I appreciate he knocks instead of just busting in on me. "Come in."

As he enters, a tentative smile graces his lips. "Wynstelle, I hope I'm not bothering you."

"No. I don't have much to do, other than patiently wait to entertain the prince again with my... *novelty*. I was just reading a boring book about Elven lineages I found in here." I set the book aside to focus on Jaden. He's far more interesting than what I've been reading. Besides, he has done nothing to betray me or use me... yet. And he helped to save my life twice already. "Please, call me Wyn."

Jaden points to my abandoned book. "If you'd like, I can bring you something more thrilling. Perhaps a list of all the ways to watch paint dry?" He looks at me expectantly, then chuckles when my mouth breaks into a grin. "But seriously, just name your topic of choice."

"Thank you, that would be nice, especially since I don't know how much longer the prince will keep me trapped here." I change the subject since I'm skirting traitorous talk, and I don't know Jaden or what he might do to me. "What business

brings you by my door? Has the prince requested my company?"

"No. I wanted to let you know I spoke to our kingdom's patrols. They informed me they have dealt with the ghouls that attacked you. Strangely, their kind have become bold, and are killing and eating humans in the markets."

"Yes, they should at least have the good manners of eating people in the forests," I say with a sardonic expression.

Jaden chuckles, shaking his head, amused by my humor. My heart feels lightened having made him laugh.

"Did Oakes tell you that one almost had me for a meal while I was traveling alone?"

"He did." He sobers and continues, "I have also received more disturbing reports that, in the recent moon cycle, the ghouls have been targeting *mortals* throughout the entire realm."

I stiffen and lean forward, gripping the edge of my window seat. "Have the mortals been killed?"

"No. Fortunately, their Elven keepers were able to fight off the attacks... as we did for you." Jaden scratches his chin. Just a bit of fine stubble covers his strong jawline, which is unusual for an elf to grow. Not that I'm looking. "I'm deeply concerned about their odd and troubling behavior. Being scavengers of death, they don't kill to eat."

I nod my agreement, this is what I understand as well from my reading. "The attacks on the road surprised me. Why do you think they are acting so strangely?"

"I don't know, but don't worry, I won't give up my investigation." He flexes his jaw, obviously frustrated by this puzzle. "I plan to visit our mage and ask if there could be some mystical influence involved."

"Oh! A mage? You have one here in the castle?" I try, yet fail, to contain my interest by bouncing on the bench.

Jaden smiles as he watches my excitement. "She isn't in the castle, but nearby. We call for her when her advice is

needed.” He tilts his head, studying me more intensely than before. “Do you wish to meet a mage?”

“*Me?*” I flush with embarrassment. “I find mages fascinating, and I’ve read all about them. I’d love to see if my worthless human senses can perceive her power, but she wouldn’t meet with me. I’m just a lowly human servant and have nothing to give her as an offering.”

“Mage Neven might want to meet you. Mages aren’t usually as prejudiced as the elf who assaulted you at the tavern.” Jaden says, “When I secure an audience, I can ask if she will allow your presence. Would you like that?”

“Only if you don’t think it would upset her. Please, don’t press the issue. I don’t want to create any more trouble for you.”

“For me?” Jaden’s eyebrows knit together. “How have you been trouble for me?”

“First, you came to my aid with the ghoulish attack, then the elf in the tavern.” I frown and pick my fingers nervously. “You were pulled into both fights on my behalf.”

Jaden’s laughter booms through the chamber.

I’m startled, then smile at the wonderful sound. He’s a very unconventional elf, but I already love how he seems so open with me.

When he settles, Jaden says, “Fighting is my trade. If anything, you’ve kept me employed. I would fight anyone to keep you safe.”

I grin again at his easy-going attitude, but my nerves rattle with what he’s pledged. Could he really care what happens to some human girl? “Well. Thank you for your service. Hopefully, I don’t cause anymore conflicts.”

Jaden gestures to the door. “Speaking of dangers, I posted a guard outside your chamber for your protection.”

“Or is it so that I don’t wander off and get myself into more trouble?” I cross my arms defiantly.

“Maybe a bit of that. Although, I appreciate a female who knows how to stir up some trouble.” He shrugs and runs his fingers through his raven-black hair. Then roguishly, it falls back over his forehead. “But mostly, I don’t want anyone to bother you.”

“You mean other than you, Oakes, and the prince when you make me strip down?” I poke. Let’s see if he really enjoys some trouble.

He blushes, and I find the effect irresistible on an elf. It appears he feels terrible about the situation.

“I’m sorry I stayed yesterday.” Jaden steps closer, his voice soft. “But I know humans are delicate, and I worried for your safety. Eldrin doesn’t know his own strength sometimes since he has just come into his power. But I had honestly thought you were agreeable to his arrangement. If you hadn’t said yes, I would have stopped him.”

I feel my face redden, remembering my poor choices. “I was agreeable, at first. But then suddenly, it was all too much. I’ve never even had a male *look* at me before that way, only with disapproval. His interest in me, his attention was exciting, and... then I thought about what Merlara said about human men taking women against their will and sometimes killing them. Suddenly, I feared for my life.”

“I never would have let him abuse you.”

“How can I know this to be true? Oakes already deceived me on the road. I understand he was under orders, but what other surprises will be thrown my way?”

“You’re correct. You don’t know me or what to expect.” Jaden kneels at my feet. “I vow on the names of my ancestors to protect you and be as honest as I can be.”

To swear by his ancestors is no small act, and I’m baffled at his behavior. “Why would you promise me anything?”

“I believe you deserve to feel safe, and I hope this grants you that feeling.”

I swallow down the tears welling in my soul. “Thank you. You are a blessing.”

Jaden's violet eyes flare with curiosity. "You fascinate me. You're so open with me about your thoughts and feelings. You say what is on your mind and in your heart."

I see his intrigue and realize he thinks I'm strange. "Is that bad?"

"Not at all. It's refreshing." He sighs, sitting back on his heels. "Please, forgive me. I can only imagine what you have been going through. I want you to know I would never force myself on you... or anyone, for that matter. I was about to pull the prince away from you, then you found your voice and told him to stop. I had only just sensed that you no longer wanted his... attention." His head hangs low. He gazes at me through his long, dark lashes with a look of remorse. "From the beginning, I was opposed to the prince's proposition. I argued, but I should have done more to stop him before he—"

I hate that he's taking on the blame. "Thank you for saying that, but this isn't yours to take on. I was curious to experience a male's touch. So, I said yes, in exchange for my freedom." I squirm uncomfortably at the thought of what it might have felt like for the prince to bring me pleasure and a release. "But I don't want to think about it anymore."

My face feels hot. All of me is overheating, fantasizing that Jaden might have been more gentle with my body.

He sees my discomfort and asks, "Are you alright?"

"Am I allowed out of this room? I feel cramped in here. It's too stuffy right now." The talk dredges up conflicting feelings of nervousness. Now, I need to know how Jaden's hands would feel exploring my body. Would he have an electric touch like Oakes or the sensual touch of Eldrin?

"I can take you to my quarters." Jaden adds quickly, "My *work* space... so you can pick out some books. How does that sound?"

I nod, excited to see more of the castle.

Jaden takes my hand, and I notice his is unusually warm. My fingers skim his calluses from what must be hours of sword practice. His strength is obvious in his muscular arms.

Even though he holds my hand gently, I know he could crush my fingers into dust if he wanted to.

Jaden stops abruptly and holds my hands up to his face to inspect. He curiously traces his fingers over my palm—over my calluses. My pulse quickens as another wave of warmth spreads throughout my body.

“Your keeper made you work hard.” He watches me fidget under his scrutiny. “I see the evidence of repetitive chores.”

I try to pull my hand away, feeling self-conscious.

“You are stronger than you appear to be, too.” Jaden smiles, then clasps my hand firmly. With his other hand, his fingers tenderly capture my chin and direct me to look into his eyes. “It’s not an insult. Once again, it’s *refreshing*.”

I relax into his touch and quirk my lips into a half-smile.

Then his scent wafts over me—reminding me of burning hot coals but with a hint of sugared cinnamon.

I inhale deeply, enjoying the scent, until I remember I should resist my attraction to these males. I will be burned by his hot coals if I let myself fall for him.

After our intense interaction, Jaden leads me down the castle halls until he arrives at a large wooden door with two guards outside. He acknowledges them with a nod, then enters his chambers.

I trail behind him, and the guards glare at me as I pass. I shiver with their blatant contempt.

Jaden unhooks his sword belt and hangs it on a rack by the entrance.

I cautiously stroll around his expansive suite. The space is three times the size of mine.

To the right is an office area with a desk and bookshelves lining the walls.

Jaden notices me staring at his library. “Pick out a few books to bring back to your suite.”

I nod happily at his suggestion. Yet, before I get lost in his books, I continue to wander, glancing through an open door. Beyond it is a large poster bed. Quickly, I spin around to face the other partitioned area, not wanting to seem overly interested in his bedroom. The open area is seems to be set up as a combat training space. Now, I am distracted by the arsenal of swords and daggers on the wall and thick mats on the floor. Without thinking, I'm drawn toward them, wishing to test the balance and inspect the detailed metalwork.

A thrill goes through me as I imagine practicing with my secretly forged swords. "Do you practice... in here?"

"Yes, sometimes, when the weather is too much for the prince. He can be fussy."

I spin toward Jaden, my eyes widening. "*You* train him?"

He smirks at my surprise, and I realize I should have guessed. "Yes, since he was a youngling."

I furrow my eyebrows. I assumed the three males were around the same age. Which is silly, I know. "Oakes mentioned the prince was around sixty years old." I press my lips together and then tilt my head. "I know it's rude to ask—"

"I'm one hundred and fifty-three. Oakes is one hundred and forty-two. Still young and brash enough ourselves, I suppose." Jaden scans the wall of weapons as he speaks, as if looking for a particular blade. "The Elven Mage chose us to guide Eldrin into his adulthood, which he is only *now* reaching. They selected Oakes for his compassion and patience." Jaden snatches up a small dagger and marches up mere inches from me, and my heart races in response. "And they picked me for my valor and passion."

As I stare up his body to meet his gaze, I catch a rebellious twinkle in his eyes.

I recognize it from my own rebellious streak. *Does* Jaden see my true nature?

He is so close. I gulp but refuse to back down and step away.

His passion seems to burn just under his skin, just like the coals I noted in his scent. The heat of his body radiates and caresses me all on its own. His black locks have fallen around his piercing violet eyes as he stares down at me. He towers over me—a full head taller and more.

I avert my eyes to gain control over my frenetic heart and stare at the dagger. “What’s that for?”

Jaden sniffs the air, so subtly that I wonder if he has. “Did you fear I would use it on you?”

“No,” I answer too quickly.

“Then why do I smell your unease?”

Doesn’t he know how gorgeous he is? Besides, he is dangerous, even without a knife in his hand. He could snap me in two without breaking a sweat.

I guess he might not know the effect he has on me since one would be hard-pressed to find an ugly elf. However, until recently, I have never been so drawn to anyone. And now, to be attracted to not only one but three elves?

“Wait...” I sputter. “You can *smell* my emotions?”

“Well, yes, and no. I have the magical gift of heightened senses, more than the already keen Elven abilities. One is smell. I can detect and memorize someone’s chemical and biological responses when I am focused and become familiar with their scents. Oakes says my sense of smell transcends mere scents but to extrapolate true emotional reactions. But I’m still training in that ability.”

My face heats, and I turn away. Does he know every time my body has a sexual response to them? Oh goodness. He *does*. I close my eyes and try to think of ghoulish stench to settle my hormones down.

I hear him chuckle as if he knows what I am attempting to do.

“You don’t smell bad if it worries you.” Jaden grins and the entire realm drops away. “Quite the contrary.”

After a few deep breaths, I redirect my attention to the blade in his hand. Swords, I understand. Males, not so much. “Why the dagger?” I choke.

Jaden hands me the blade handle out so I can grab it safely. When I don’t immediately take it, he gestures again.

I accept gingerly, as if I don’t wish to touch it. Because I don’t, not in an elf’s presence. I’m uncertain what he expects from me now.

He nods and finally steps back, giving me space to breathe again. “What do you think of it?”

I hold out the blade so I can inspect its craftsmanship. I hum when I note its elegant, clean lines. Then something inside me takes over. I spin it around like an expert. Clasp onto the grip, I hold it in a defensive stance, but away from him, so he knows I’m not on the attack. I twist it around in my hand, flip it into the air, further testing its balance, and catch it gracefully. Then I hold the blade, offering it back to Jaden. “Excellent balance. Beautifully crafted. A worthy weapon.”

His eyes widen. “How did you know how to do all that?”

“I thought you knew. Isn’t that why you had me inspect the blade?”

“Knew what?”

“Merlara is a swordsmith. I’ve been working in her foundry since I was old enough to fetch her tools. She had me test out the balance of a blade when she didn’t have enough time. Was she not supposed to allow me to do that?”

“*That’s* how you earned your callouses. A foundry?” Jaden says in awe. He goes over to his desk, retrieves a small bundle, and opens it, revealing the dagger I carried while traveling. “Does that explain why you had this in your pack?”

The guilt of possessing an illegal weapon slams into me, and I stagger backward as if I can separate my connection to the crime. “I... uh...” What will he do to me since I brought a dagger to the royal courts?

“You used this on the ghouls in Crowland.” Jaden’s voice is steady and without emotion. “What else were you planning to do with it?” He stalks toward me slowly, his calculating gaze never leaving my face.

“I only brought it to survive on the road. And I almost didn’t survive it. *Twice.*” My eyes fill with tears. He has brought me here to confront my crime, not to pick out books. He was letting me drop my guard so he could surprise me now.

Will he have Eldrin execute me?

“I meant no harm to any of you. I swear it!”

“You didn’t plan on using it on Prince Eldrin? Or King Magnus?”

“*Stars*, no!” My mouth drops open. “I would *never* hurt an elf. I didn’t even want to use it on the ghoul. I only brought it along because it scared me to travel alone. But I left it in the bathing room in my bag so you would know I meant no harm.” My eyes plead for him to understand. “Oakes told you I had it?”

“No. He hasn’t mentioned it. But I saw you with it myself during the attack in Crowland.”

“Oh, yes. I remember now.” I’d been half-dead and had forgotten that bit. I wipe my tears away and hang my head in defeat. “Are you going to have me executed?” My knees threaten to give out, and I sway.

“*What?* No!” Jaden rushes to hold on to me and keep me from passing out. “I never sensed you wanted to harm us. However, I would be an incompetent protector of the prince if I didn’t confirm your intentions. You were wise to leave it in your bag. Don’t worry, I won’t mention it to anyone.”

My eyes snap up to meet his. “Why are you covering my crime?”

“I don’t believe it is one.” Jaden shrugs. “Do you swear it was only for protecting yourself on the road?”

“Yes. Completely.” I nod vigorously, relieved to hear I am free from punishment.

Jaden studies my bouncing breasts in the bodice style dress and mumbles, “Eldrin is such an imp.”

I remember my bosom, ready to break free from its cage. I grasp my cleavage and spin around, embarrassed by my oversized breasts. Why can't I have small elegant Elven breasts? “Oakes cinched me too tight. I can barely breathe. Can you adjust it, so I don't pass out? And so I'm not falling out of this absurd thing?”

With a light trace of his fingers, Jaden brushes my long, honey-brown hair off my back and over my shoulders. His heated touch sends a shiver down my spine, followed by goosebumps.

He asks, “Are you ticklish?”

I steady my breathing as I hear the tie of my lacing coming undone, reminding myself I can't get excited, or he will smell it on me. “I don't know if I am.”

He chuckles and asks skeptically, “You *don't know?*”

Why am I making the elves laugh?

Am I something to poke fun at, or is my innocence funny to them?

Still feeling raw after being confronted about the dagger, I don't enjoy his laughter.

As he skillfully finishes adjusting my bodice laces, tears form in my eyes. I say with a quaver in my voice, “No, I don't know.”

Jaden hears my sadness and leaps around to face me. “What's wrong?” His hands cradle my jaw, and his heat and strength pour into me.

After a second to process his sudden movement, I sniff. “It's... well, no one has touched me much since I was an infant. Elves aren't physically demonstrative, as far as I have known with my keeper, Merlara.” I suck in a quick breath. “It's been overwhelming the last few days with the three of you. Oakes and his healing. Eldrin and his exploration. And you—just holding my hand stirs up all kinds of new emotions

and unfamiliar physical reactions which I don't know how to interpret or how to react. It seems my confusion and inexperience amuses you."

"Oh, love, I'm not laughing *at* you." Jaden strokes my cheeks softly with his thumbs. "Any amusement I have with you is delight, not mockery. All right?"

I sniff and nod. Could he really mean what he says? Does he delight in me?

With his fingertips, Jaden now strokes my cheek where my scars show on my skin. "You have been through so much in your young life. I admire you for your strength. You have stood up to the prince. You fought the ghouls." He traces the lines of my marks again.

I turn my face away, breaking the contact, wishing I wasn't marred so he might find me beautiful.

"You should wear these marks with pride. You are a fighter. But fighters also need recovery times. Healing. Comfort." Jaden opens his arms up to me. "Would it be too much if I hold you right now?"

"I think I can handle that." I awkwardly hold my arms at my sides as he steps closer.

His powerful embrace feels as if it wraps my entire being from head to toe, like a blanket of affection. I bask in his warmth, but in the back of my mind, I already dread the loss. At any moment, I will float aimlessly again in the universe with no anchor. My arms tentatively move to settle at his narrow waist. When he doesn't pull away from my touch, I relax into him and encircle his torso.

"I'm sorry you haven't been given enough of this before. I've read that humans need more physical contact than elves. Your keeper should have been more attentive," he says with frustration for me.

I pull him closer, if that's possible. "You really don't think that I'm a fool?"

"Of course not. And elves need their fair share of affection, too. Although we might act like we don't. If you ever need

another hug, I will be here for you. All right?"

I exhale into his rigid chest. Underneath all his muscles, Jaden is tender.

He slowly steps back, though he seems ready to jump back into our embrace if I make a sign I may need more. But I allow the distance with a grace that I'm not feeling.

"Does your skirt have pockets?" he asks, pulling at the sides of my skirt and inspecting it.

"Hm?" I frown at his non sequitur. "No. I wished it did. What use is a garment if it isn't utilitarian? But why do you ask?"

"This blade is yours again." He places my dagger in my hand.

"No. It's illegal." I walk to the weapon's wall and rest it on top of one of the dagger cradles. "The design is my own. I made it myself when I was only thirteen." I smile proudly.

"Impressive." He runs his fingers over the delicate design on the handle with reverence.

For a moment, I imagine I am the blade and his fingers trace my lines.

To shake free of the naughty thoughts, I clear my throat. "If your patrols are taking care of the ghouls, then hopefully, I won't need a weapon on the roads on my way home. It's yours now—a gift from me for your kindness."

Jaden tenses with my mention of ghouls, then snatches the dagger down and tries again to make me take it. "That is a generous offer, but you should keep it."

"No. I want to earn your trust. I shouldn't have brought it here. I shouldn't own it at all."

"I trust you, Wyn." Jaden sighs, relenting to my stubbornness on the subject. "Fine, I accept your gift for now, but only with a stipulation. I insist I will be the one to escort you when the time comes for you to leave the castle. And I *will* require that you carry a blade on you."

I allow myself a small smile. “All right. I agree with those terms.”

“Now that this is settled...” Jaden motions me over to the bookcases. “Why don’t you pick out some books? You can read in my lounge chair while I finish my paperwork.”

Content, I find a title on human studies and curl up in Jaden’s plush chaise lounge.

HOLDING BACK

JADEN

As the sun sets in the sky, I nudge Wyn while she sleeps peacefully in my reading chair. She looks so lovely that I hate to disturb her, but Eldrin will be furious with me if we don't show up for dinner.

“Wynstelle?” I call, and she opens her alluring, gold-rimmed brown eyes.

I have to summon all my training as a warrior to help me restrain myself from the urge to drop to my knees right there and kiss her.

Why does Eldrin get everything he wants? *He's the prince, idiot.*

Wyn is so different from the last female that caught my attention. That was over twenty years ago. Eldrin caused his reckless damage then, too. However, no female has captured my heart the way Wyn already has. She is already more intriguing than anyone else I have known. Wyn is brave and smart—two things I insist upon in a mate. Even sheltered from the realm, she has learned to read and studies books. She isn't completely ignorant to the world, just innocent. But my attraction is more than any of this, although even on its own would be enough for me.

When our eyes met in Crowland, I felt a pull to her soul.

Is it really possible to have a mate bond match... with a human? Whatever my consuming need to be with her is, I can't ignore it, not for much longer.

"Time for dinner," I say softly and hold my hand out to help Wyn to her feet.

"Already?" She rubs her eyes and stretches. Her plump breasts threaten to tumble out of the bodice.

Could I behave myself if they do? Of course, I can... if she doesn't *want* to be groped. If she wants me to touch her, I will happily deal with Eldrin's vengeance for the pleasure of bringing her pleasure. Perhaps she wouldn't mind. Her sweet orange blossom scent that sometimes fills the air when I touch her suggests she finds me attractive, too.

Then I remind myself that she doesn't have the choice to choose me. Wyn is correct. In many ways, she is Eldrin's latest conquest. Until Eldrin is done with her, I can do very little to pursue her except to be a good friend, learn every detail about her, and do everything I can to keep the entitled prince from destroying her heart and soul.

Wyn notices my eyes have dropped to her chest, and she pulls at her bodice in an attempt to cover herself more and then blushes.

I avert my gaze. I must speak to Eldrin about proper attire for this precious woman. She isn't comfortable in this revealing getup, and my pants are now consistently a size too small in front. I am sure the other male elves in the castle are also suffering from tight pants, but then they would likely pretend distaste for the woman. Sometimes I can't stand my own kind.

Now, the royal courtiers who had been vying for Eldrin's attention are irritated by his antics. They don't appreciate being relegated as inferior to the prince's latest pursuit, a mere mortal.

However, knowing her, I can see why he's become obsessed. Oakes seems distracted by her presence too. If I

have to fight for her attention, I will do it. I just hope she isn't too upset with me for doing my job.

I hadn't wanted to scare her with my questions about the dagger, but I had to know why she carried a weapon.

But the whole notion that human servants can't carry a weapon to protect themselves is an overreaction to the war. They are vulnerable to attacks, as I witnessed in Crowland.

My mind swims back to her dagger demonstration. I loved the way she handled the blade with the skill of an expert. Her flashy moves rival my own skills. She must have practiced much more than her keeper asked of her 'to only test a blade's balance', as she claims.

Now I am hard just thinking about her tiny hands gripping... the handle of my dagger. I take a deep breath to calm myself. Going into the dining hall with evidence of my arousal will set Eldrin off.

I offer my arm as we walk down the corridor to the prince's dining room. Her mood has shifted after our embrace, and now she fills the air with notes of lavender—her scent for calm. For the first time since she arrived at the castle, Wyn seems to be finally relaxed. My chest fills with pride that I have made her feel safe and comfortable.

Then my pride turns to concern.

Will Eldrin use the shift to his advantage and hurt her in the end? What *is* Eldrin's game here? And why does the prince seem different since her arrival?

Has she really rattled Eldrin into considering his actions and behavior?

Perhaps Oakes senses the prince's actual intent. I will ask what he thinks of Eldrin's interest in Wyn.

Hopefully, from now on, Eldrin will be gentle with Wynstelle and leave her with a positive experience. If he doesn't, I will *never* forgive him. I'll have centuries to hold on to my resentment.

I pause outside of the prince's dining hall. I don't want to share her company with the others.

How has she captured my attention so completely? Perhaps I'm not imagining the mate match.

Am I jealous of the time I watched Oakes spend with her on the road? Yes. I wish I am the one who can heal her.

I curse. I had only found Oakes in Crowland after the ghouls abducted her. If Eldrin had let me leave with Oakes as I had wanted to do, then she wouldn't have almost died. I could have stopped the ghouls in the street.

The faint scars on her cheek remind me how Eldrin and Oakes have already put her at risk. But it also reminds me of how resilient she is.

Standing side by side before the dining hall's threshold, Wyn does not know my inner turmoil as she smiles up at me. She squeezes my hand before she releases my grip and enters the hall.

My heart hammers in my chest. This woman thrills me to my core. She surprises me with every encounter—how she balances vulnerability and strength. Her instincts are better than she might realize since she let go of my hand before Eldrin witnessed our intimate moment.

She's smart. I'm not certain I want to play it smart anymore.

"We thought you were lost," the prince says lightheartedly as we enter the dining room, but I hear his bitterness and jealousy. "Wynstelle, I came by to visit you earlier, but you weren't there."

"Oh, I was with Jaden. He let me read some of his books from his library since I had grown restless in my room alone."

Prince Eldrin shoots me a look of irritation as Wyn takes her seat. "Just let *me* know what books you'd like to read, and *I'll* have them sent to your room."

I suppress a grimace at the subtle warning.

“That’s kind of you... just as Jaden showed mercy on me earlier.” Wyn glances at me, and I see she has picked up the same insinuation. “It must be satisfying to have such honorable and virtuous advisors to match your own character.”

Eldrin raises an eyebrow and then succumbs to the compliment.

Oakes eyes me, and we both keep a straight face with Wyn’s crafted and brilliant comment. She has relieved any doubt in Eldrin’s mind that anything untoward has happened with Oakes or me. But if Eldrin thinks about it, he might realize she could be suggesting the opposite.

I’m even more impressed with this mind of hers.

I will do anything I can to protect her from more pain. I will even deal with Eldrin if it comes to it.

Shuddering from my past love life and how I failed before, I only hope it won’t be my own actions that cause her more suffering.

TRUST

WYNSTELLE

The following morning, I notice that a brownie fae delivered food and clothing and magically cleaned my suite while I slept. I make a mental note to leave a food offering for the secretive housekeeper to thank them. The brownies fascinate me, and I hope I might catch a glimpse of them while I'm here.

Also left behind is a new dress, one that sufficiently covers my chest and easily pulls over my head without the need for assistance. My travel bag has been returned, along with a modest, elegant nightgown and a lounging robe. I don't see my cloak, which suggests I'm staying for a while longer. At least Jaden or Oakes must have talked some sense into the prince about my wardrobe.

A pile of books arrives with a note from Eldrin on top: "Don't hesitate to ask one of the *servants* for anything you need." The handwriting of *servants* is pressed harder on the paper than the other words. I roll my eyes. I suppose when one has everything, one can be jealous when someone glances at one's toys.

Why does it bother Eldrin so much that Jaden spent a few hours with me?

After a brief struggle, I remove the bodice-style dress by myself that I ended up sleeping in. Then I brush my wild

tresses and use the luxurious bathing facility in my suite. Afterward, I happily change into my new and improved dress.

None of the three males visit me throughout the day, and I am all right with that. Never having had much free time before, I keep myself busy by reading up on the mortal realm with Eldrin's new books.

Yet, I find my mind drifting to Eldrin, Oakes, and Jaden, reflecting on their differences and similarities. I have never spent so much time around males, and my body and heart are responding to the new stimuli.

It's been several hours since the sun has set. A lantern burns by my bed so I can finish the book on human traditions. I must prepare myself for whatever might happen. Soon, Eldrin will probably become disappointed by my *novelty* and banish me. Although, I hope Eldrin really isn't that selfish to do something like that in frustration. Either way, I love learning, and it is a treat to discover more about my kind. Merlara didn't have much in her library about mortals.

After a light tap on the door, it opens without my consent. I'm not surprised. I am a prisoner-guest. Prince Eldrin slips inside, his eyes downcast as if he were a naughty child.

"May I come in?" he asks before stepping further into the room.

"As if you don't own the place." I chuckle to take out the sting in my words, setting my book down.

Eldrin flushes pink, and I can't believe my eyes. It's rare for an elf to be embarrassed, and I can only imagine it is doubly so for royal elves.

"I can leave." He turns toward the door.

"No. Stay. I am only teasing." I lean forward and hold my hand out to show the sincerity in my words.

"I overstepped before. I am trying to make amends," he explains, his tone somber and remorseful. "But I might be overstepping once again."

I close my eyes and try to balance my conflicting feelings. I like him, even though we had a rocky start. “What can I do for you, Your Highness?”

“*Eldrin*,” he corrects me. “Well, I... uh, I wanted to sleep next to you tonight.”

My heart thumps, worrying he means to have more than just sleep. Should I heed Oakes’ warning and turn the prince away?

“Oakes had told me about the ghoul attack and how he healed you through the night.” Eldrin nears the bed. “I was jealous.”

“Jealous?” I place my hand over my heart in shock. “What you did with me was much more intimate than that.”

“Invasive, but not intimate.” Eldrin sits on the edge of the bed. “I shouldn’t ask this of you, but I only want to hold you the way Oakes did. And I’m *not* demanding this favor. I only want from you what you give willingly, and if it is acceptable, to nestle beside you. It sounded as if you and Oakes had a moment of sharing and trust... I would like that with you, a moment of being... truly myself.”

I think he must have the magic of seduction since I want him near me again. It seems plausible that he doesn’t experience being his true self very often, if at all. Most in his kingdom aren’t even allowed to call him by his given name. Could he be interested in me *because* I am something outside his restricted world? Maybe he thinks *he* can be a different person than he usually is because *I* am different.

“By the way, I caught the wit in your comment on the *virtuousness* of my advisors. I let it pass because it amused me... and my advisors.”

Daring to be forward, I place my hand over his heart. “I swear nothing inappropriate has happened with either of them.”

“I know, but they enjoy your company.” There’s a wistfulness in his voice. “I suppose I’m also jealous that they

seem to like you better than they like me.” He chuckles at himself.

I raise my eyebrows at that. The males hardly know me enough to like me. “Well, I’ve enjoyed their kindness.” My voice was unsure and quiet. “I suppose this is what it must be like having friends. But I wouldn’t really know, since I have never had a true friend before.”

“Truly?” The prince moves closer as if trying to make up for the lack. “Well, I can be your friend.”

“Oh. You want that? With me?” I choke on the idea a prince would want to be my friend. “It seems you would have plenty of *friends* to sleep with.” I ask, “Why me?”

“I have had many elves *in* my bed, but they are not companions. We have fun, but I never fall asleep with them.”

“Why not? Do you not trust them?”

“I can’t say that I trust them, but it is more that I don’t want them to get the wrong idea about my intentions.”

The females probably assume he wants them as a life-mate, but to confirm my suspicions, I ask, “What idea is that?”

“That I would offer them more than one night.”

I think about how that is its own kind of loneliness—to never trust someone’s intentions. Maybe he wants a genuine connection with me. A friendship of sorts. Interrupting my quiet contemplation, he says, “I’m spoiled.” Then he sighs. “I must be *exhausting*.”

His self-deprecating humor relieves the tension that has built up in the room.

I burst out in laughter. “Just a bit, but I’ll allow you to join me while we *sleep*. If only to relieve *my exhaustion*.”

Eldrin grins widely and crawls up beside me. His natural sandalwood scent fills my senses. I want him to touch me again now that I know he doesn’t mean to harm me. Perhaps I can experience the pleasure he could bring me.

Tentatively, he pulls me close, as Oakes did when I'd been injured. He studies my face and lightly touches my cheek where my faint scars from the ghoul are highlighted by the candlelight. "Does your injury still hurt?"

"No. Oakes' magic healed me."

"He could probably make the marks disappear altogether."

"Why should he bother with my scars?" I shrug. I don't see the point of worrying about my appearance. Jaden made me feel as if he considered them a badge of courage.

"Oakes has an interest in your well-being." Eldrin shifts away to read my expression. "Has he done anything to indicate otherwise?"

"No. Oakes has been..." I don't know exactly what he has been, but he has shown deep concern. My comment about the scars has nothing to do with Oakes. "He's been fine. I meant there's no reason to fix me."

"Why shouldn't there be a reason?"

"It isn't as if I am looking for a mate, especially if I'm staying in Elfhome." I stare at him pointedly, reminding him of our deal. "No elf will care if a mortal servant has a marred face."

"I care." He growls low.

"So my ugliness bothers you?"

"What? I mean... well..." Eldrin stumbles over his words. "You're beautiful... with or without scars, but..." He huffs when I smirk at his awkwardness. I enjoy flustering him. I suppose the faeries taught me something after all. I find it amusing to disarm him, to rid him of his royal composure. His gaze grows intense and seductive as he narrows his eyes, catching onto my teasing. "Your flawless inner beauty should reflect in your outer being."

My eyes go wide at his flattery.

"Although..." His face twists in playful contemplation. "I believe you flustered me on purpose, which makes me question how *nice* you are."

“You told me to be brutal.” I smirk.

“No, I said brutally *honest*.”

“Oh, is there a difference?” I crinkle my eyes in an exaggerated wince.

Amused, he shakes his head at my silliness.

I settle back against his chest. “You can handle a bit of teasing, even if you are as *spoiled* as you claimed earlier.”

“I suppose I deserve some retribution.” Eldrin rests his head near mine and is quiet for a long while.

I think he has fallen asleep.

Then he asks, “Don’t you want a mate?”

“Why? Do you know a free human male in Elfhame?” I don’t want to know the answer, but maybe I can stop him from asking any more questions about mating if I point out I don’t have any options.

Why is he so interested in my having a mate? Even his sexual interest in me doesn’t account for that. Once his mortal obsession is over, he will move on and forget me—which only makes sense. Perhaps he still feels guilty for his previous behavior and wants to find someone to relieve his conscience when he sends me away?

“If you would like to know a human male, I hear a few are scattered throughout the realm. However, I wouldn’t presume to match you with just anyone.” Eldrin tightens his grip on me. “Would you want to meet them?” He sounds as if he doesn’t want to hear the answer.

“No.” I absentmindedly trail my fingers down his muscular arm. “I don’t know if I’d even like my kind. I’ve been reading about them in the books you lent me.”

“You’ve met no other humans in Elfhame?”

“I once saw one at a distance. When I was twelve years old, an elderly woman was traveling with her keeper. It was such an odd sight to see the woman’s wrinkled skin and fragile body. Even when elves are at an advanced age, they never look

as tired as she did. I wanted to meet her, but Merlara refused to let me go near. I didn't understand why. I still don't. I've always assumed human servants weren't allowed to socialize with other humans."

"There is no law against socialization that I know of. Perhaps your keeper didn't want you to worry about your own mortality." Eldrin says, but his tone lacks conviction.

"Maybe."

"If it would make you happy, I can locate the other humans, not as prospective mates necessarily, and summon them here so you can meet them."

"Please don't disrupt anyone's life on my account. But thank you for the thought." I snuggle into his chest. "Is it hard being a prince?" I'm not expecting him to answer me directly.

"Sometimes." Eldrin chuffs. "Oh! Listen to me, whining that I have it hard. I sleep on the finest beds. Dress in the finest clothes. I have all my needs met—"

"But you don't have all your needs met," I interrupt.

Eldrin opens his mouth to protest but sighs instead, nodding.

"You don't feel safe to be friends with the elves you meet." I pull back to look him in the eye. "Do you trust Oakes and Jaden?"

"I trust them with my life." There's still hesitation in his voice.

"But other than keeping you alive?" I ask, my eyes wide with concern.

His face softens as he studies me. "Mostly, yes. They would never harm me or be disloyal. However, I have done things I'm not so proud of." He breathes in deeply to continue. "I haven't been kind when I should have been."

"Have you made up for these trespasses?" I ask.

"I've tried. But some mistakes are too painful. It will take time to heal—maybe centuries." Eldrin clasps my face. "And

with you? Can you forgive me? I was so... callous. Treating you as if your body were to be bartered. I'm ashamed. And now I wonder, what if others didn't want my advances?"

I stare at him, thinking of how to respond. He's working through complicated issues, and honest answers are necessary. "I can't speak for anyone else, but I found you attractive. However, I incorrectly assumed that you only wanted to *see* a mortal body. Although I enjoyed your touch... at first. I was also worried about refusing your offer. I thought if I denied your request that I was going to be sent to my death or banished to the mortal realm."

"I wouldn't have banished you if you said no." Eldrin's eyes implore me to believe him.

"How was I supposed to know?" I tear up.

"Oh, my sweet mortal." Eldrin pulls me close. "I am such a monster. And I didn't even know it!" He holds me for a moment and then sits up abruptly, letting me go. He sighs into his hand, shame filling his stormy blue eyes. "How can I ask you to forgive me? Perhaps you shouldn't." He stands up.

"Eldrin?" My brow crinkles with confusion. "Did you know any better before?"

He stops and considers me. "No. I believed my sexual partners always came to me willingly."

"I don't know what happened before me. Maybe I am just a naïve human who was desperate and agreed to a deal I didn't fully understand." I pause and ask, "But in the future, will you assume someone making a deal with you is there willingly?"

"Now that I know what I've done to you. No, of course not. I will never use sex as part of my dealings again."

I sigh. "You really want me to be honest?"

He nods.

"I haven't completely forgiven you for putting me in that situation. However, when I hear your desperation to be better, I can move toward forgiveness."

Eldrin sits down on the bed. “Why are you *genuinely* kind to me?”

“Because I don’t think you were trying to be mean to me.” I shrug. “But you have never had to think beyond yourself.”

“I haven’t even had to think about my kingdom yet.” Eldrin’s gaze is distant as he contemplates my words. “I’ve only thought of Oakes and Jaden, my most trusted, in what they were in relation *to* me.”

“It doesn’t have to be like that in your future,” I suggest.

“How do I become like you?” he asks earnestly.

“*Me?*” I laugh. “Why would you want to be like me?”

“You’re... *good.*” Eldrin leans in close and gazes into my eyes. “I can see it. You have a golden soul. So tell me how.”

“Stop.”

Eldrin pulls back. “Stop what?”

I grin, taken by his eagerness to listen and please me. “No. Before you do something, you must stop for a moment. Ask yourself what the other person might be going through. What do they care about? Are you hurting them? Is there anything you can do to lessen their pain?”

“Is that what you do?” Eldrin asks.

“I suppose it’s automatic now. But yes, I think of others or the realm when I make a decision. Not that what I do usually has any importance in harming others.”

Eldrin paces the room for a few moments. “What if I can’t imagine what someone wants or needs?”

“Ask.”

Eldrin booms out a laugh. “You must think me a fool. It’s so simple.”

“You’d be surprised. You aren’t the only one like this. I’ve read many accounts of people who never concern themselves with thinking about others. At least you wish to learn.”

He rubs his chin and stares at me. “I’ve never felt this close to anyone, and I would like to stay with you tonight. However, I am *asking* for an honest answer... Would you like me to leave?”

“Stay to *sleep*?” I pat the bed next to me.

The prince grins ear to ear and crawls back into bed, pulling me close.

And we both fall into pleasant dreams.



I jump back as I feel something shift beside me.

Prince Eldrin. I had forgotten he was here. It seems like such a strange dream to have a male in my bed. Or to have such a luxurious bed.

“Good morning,” Eldrin says as he stretches. “That was the best sleep I’ve had since my youth.” He leans over, kisses my cheek, and then hops out of bed. “Thank you for allowing me in your bed and also for our talk.”

“Uh, yeah.” My body is still registering the buzzing sensation where he kissed me. “I’m your humble servant.”

“You are neither.” He grins. “May I return tonight?”

“The elves in your court might not appreciate you spending so much time with me. Especially at night.”

“I don’t care what they think.”

“Maybe you—”

Eldrin slips out of my room before I finish my sentence.

As much as I like the prince, I have to remember he’s led a sheltered life just as I have, only at opposite ends of the spectrum. He still doesn’t seem to understand that not all of us are privileged or protected.

I’m unsure what to do about my time with him. He essentially owns my freedom, my future, my life. He doesn’t

want to let me go yet. I'm not sure I want him to.

If I were to run, I would be a fugitive, and I wouldn't likely make it far. Either Elven soldiers would kill me as a rogue human or ghouls would eat me. Even if I could make it to a portal, I don't think I could open one on my own. I hear they only can be created with Elven magic and a chant. Then, if I got through, I might not survive alone in an unknown realm. I wouldn't know what I could forage. I don't think I could trust anyone either.

No. I have to stay here and try to stay alive long enough so Eldrin becomes bored with me and I can return to Merlara.

As I tell myself this, something deep inside knows it won't happen.

But I hold on to the dream. It's the only thing keeping me from falling apart.

SCARS

OAKES

*S*how up at Wyn's door a half-hour before breakfast. My frustration with the prince is brewing, and I stand in the hallway for a moment to wrangle my emotions.

Why has Eldrin kept Wynstelle when he should let her go back home, where she will be safe? Of course, I want her around for my own selfish reasons. But my need to regain her trust shouldn't supersede her safety.

He needs to let go of whatever is making him hold on to her so she can leave before she draws more attention. Rumblings of anger in the castle about her presence have reached my ears, and not always through my empathic sense. That isn't a good sign. I can sense the ebb and flow of the castle inhabitants, but I have rarely heard their complaints in the halls before now.

Pulling myself together, I knock.

Wyn opens the door to her chambers with a satisfied smile on her beautiful face. "You're early for breakfast."

My frustration rears up again. Eldrin spent the night with her. I don't even have Jaden's keen senses, but I can smell the prince's scent all over her.

Jealousy takes hold. I wish to be in her bed at night. She might have invited me in if it weren't for Eldrin's making me keep the truth of who I am from her. She may never trust me

again. Yet he's the one who gets to reap the rewards and take advantage of his privilege?

I rush forward, making her step back clumsily. I corral her into a chair, dropping to my knees before her.

Goddess, I want to drop my head into her lap and hold her. Or perhaps lift her skirts and bring her the pleasure she craves. I doubt very much Eldrin concerns himself with her needs and enjoyment.

Wyn stares at me, wide-eyed, and demands, "What's going on?"

"Prince Eldrin commanded I heal your scars," I state curtly.

I know I shouldn't display my irritation, but I have never been so stirred up in my life. Wyn brings up feelings no one has generated before. Inadvertently, she also makes me question my loyalty to Eldrin.

"I'm sorry that he *forced* you to visit me," Wyn says with an edge, but her cheeks flush pink with my abrupt closeness. Goddess, she's beautiful even when she's mad.

I don't meet her eyes. Now I feel like a complete ass. Before I can reach out to touch her cheek, she says with her sadness ringing clearly, "Just so you know, I told him not to bother you with this."

"He mentioned you would protest." Does she not want me near her? I try again to keep my emotions in check. My hands hover over her cheeks. Finally meeting her eyes, my body vibrates with tension and anxiety that I have fucked everything up. "May I touch you?"

Instead of agreeing, she states without question, "You're upset with me."

Resting my hands on my knees, I sigh and don't respond for a minute.

Wyn waits me out, patiently.

"I'm not upset with *you*. But I am worried," I explain. "The prince doesn't deal with the repercussions of his actions

most of the time. *I* do. Or Jaden does. Or another person caught in his wake, like you. His stay here last night didn't go unnoticed, no matter how covert he thinks he was. Word has spread to King Magnus and his second-in-command, Turgon. This can't continue or I'm not sure if even Eldrin can keep you safe from his father."

"You sound as if I have some say in his interest in me!" Wyn grumbles. "What am I to do? Eldrin still holds my fate in his hands. I just want this to be over." Her temper brews. "This whole situation with the prince is already convoluted, *without* the input of outside sources. Since that first incident, Eldrin has been nothing but kind. I can't just spit in his face and hope for the best. Besides, he seems to want to be a better person."

"You're correct—about all of it." I stare at her scars instead of looking into her golden-brown eyes. They will pull me in and keep me as her willing servant. "I have reminded those upset with you that you're subject to the prince's whims. I just hope the king remembers that, too."

Wyn's shoulders slump, and she leans toward me.

I take it as her need for healing—and not just the scars. I slowly stroke her marred skin with my thumb, erasing the damage of the ghouls. The marks are only there because *I* failed to protect her in Crowland. I wanted to continue to fix her scars before she had arrived at the castle. Yet now Eldrin has the audacity to demand I heal Wyn after forbidding me to go near her again without his permission?

The prince's jealousy is ridiculous. Sleeping next to her at the inn was for *healing* purposes. Although, if I am honest with myself, I enjoyed her body pressed against mine in bed, and I sensed she enjoyed it as well. Her body responded to mine. During the night, she had shifted her sex against my thigh. I can almost feel the heat of her now.

I take a deep breath to calm my loins. I am a healer. And Wynstelle needs healing.

Her eyes drift closed as she enjoys my electric touch. I sense her emotions easily. She is open even after all that has

happened. She likes my attention, my touch, although our circumstances frustrate her.

Truth be told, I *want* to be close to her again. I long for my time with Wyn before Eldrin claimed her as his own. I think about our conversations on the road and how her face lit up when discovering a new plant or faerie. She loves books and learning, just as I do.

On the road, it was easy to get lost in the moment and pretend I wasn't a royal advisor and she was my mate. I contemplated turning away from the castle gates that day, abandoning my life and pledge to Eldrin. If, for a second, I believed I could have gotten away with vanishing, I would have done it... only if Wyn agreed. I'm fairly certain she would have gone with me.

Then I wonder how I would have explained the subterfuge about our supposed chance meeting on the road. Perhaps she would have forgiven me.

Hopefully, she will forgive me now.

Wyn quivers at the feel of my light, healing touch, but barely looking me in the eye. She thinks I never truly cared for her, but the opposite is true. I care far more than I should.

I clench my jaw. I have to let her know my feelings before she leaves the castle for good. But first, I will gift her my healing magic.

"May I see the scars on your stomach?" I ask.

"It..." Wyn touches her abdomen over her dress. "It doesn't matter."

"May I look?"

Wyn's cheeks turn pink with embarrassment, but she concedes.

She stands up and pulls her nightgown over her head. Her expression shows she feels naked even though she wears underpants and her breasts are bound. She closes herself off, her arms over her chest, leaving her stomach exposed.

Still on my knees in front of her, I feel as if I am worshipping her as a goddess.

Perhaps she is in her own way—a mortal deity ruling over my heart.

I wonder, how did that happen so fast, so instantaneously? She feels like my mate match, but fated mates are only supposed to exist between elves.

I lightly trail my hands over the ghoul's marks. "I'm *so* sorry."

Her flesh goose-bumps under my caress.

"It's fine. I lived." Wyn shrugs and keeps her gaze locked in the far corner to distance her mind from what's happening.

My energy pours into her skin, and she leans into it despite her cool demeanor. Will I ever win back her trust? "I never meant for *any* of this to happen."

"I didn't ask for any of this either." Wyn flattens her lips in anger. "If the prince released me this second, I would be on the road to Betonie in the next."

"I know." I trace the scars, and they slowly disappear.

I vow to never let her get hurt again.

Protecting her from the royal court has meant keeping her out of their field of vision, but Eldrin keeps shoving her presence in their faces with this blatant interest. Eldrin's servants and guards are loyal to the prince, but they aren't thrilled about the human either. Most think of Wyn as a pest, at the very least. Eldrin's servants say he flaunts his interest too much. The whispers of how fond Eldrin is of a mortal female are not being taken lightly.

I have tried to counter the rumors by laughing them off as the prince's young and inquisitive nature. I assure the other elves his interest will soon fade once the prince grows bored. Of course, in any other circumstance, that would have been true already.

Why do I sense there is more to the prince's interest in Wynstelle? What if Eldrin is actually falling in love? Likely,

I'm not the only one who wonders the same thing.

Wyn sighs and looks at me. "I don't belong here. Stupidly, I thought we had become friends on the road. A highborn elf befriending a human servant? I was naïve to think such a foolish thing. You were just there to do a job for the prince." Wyn turns her gaze away from me as I continue to brush my fingers over her scars on her stomach.

I want to be more than mere friends. I want to press my lips to the soft swell of her belly and explore her lower with my mouth.

I'm already on my knees before her, but she will laugh at me if I confess that. Should I plead for her forgiveness? Beg for her heart?

Wyn suddenly whips her gaze to mine when I don't immediately address her fear of our false friendship. "And now you seem irritated by my very presence."

I jump up, standing so close she gasps. My hands come up to cradle her face in my large palms. My gaze sliding over her lush mouth, I wonder what her lips taste like. Might she slap me if I try to find out?

Why does it feel as if her half naked body has gravitated to press against me? Is it my imagination that her body craves my touch?

"*I am not irritated with you.*" I enunciate every word. "And I *am* your friend. Maybe your only one. I may have been forced to deceive you when I met you, but please believe me when I tell you it killed me to do it."

Wyn's eyes water with my declarations. "Why would an elf claim a mortal as a genuine friend?"

"Believe me..." I steady my nerves with a deep breath. "Your friendship means more to me than you know."

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because I want what is best for you. I will do whatever it takes to earn your favor back. However I have to prove that over time. But please, give me a chance."

Wyn cocks her head at me, clearly confused at my emphatic plea. “I don’t see why my forgiveness would mean that much to you, but I understand why you did what you did. Eldrin asked you to find out about me. But now, I’m upset because of how distant you have been since I’ve been here.”

“Oh,” I say, realizing I have misread her irritation with me. “I’m sorry that I made you feel worse. Eldrin has been jealous, and well, I thought you wouldn’t forgive me... not truly.”

“I thought you were my first friend.” Wyn shakes her head like she feels silly for confessing that. “Can you tell me something?” Wyn asks. “Can I trust Jaden?”

“Jaden is honorable and honest.” I nod. “If he has stated something to you, it is the truth.”

“And Eldrin?” she asks.

“He won’t *mean* to hurt you.”

Wyn shivers but nods with understanding.

MAGE

WYNSTELLE

*A*fter a sharp knock at my door, I snap awake, and I hurry over to see who's visiting me this morning. Oakes and Jaden block the entire view of the hallway with their large frames as they stand stoically, waiting for entry.

I step aside and watch their curiously reserved behavior as they stride inside my bedchamber.

Oakes feels distant again. He's like a glowing crucible of melted metal one minute and an icy creek the next. His words about how much I mean to him echo in my mind and heart. Could he truly mean it? Perhaps his confusing behavior results from wanting a deeper friendship with me, when it's obvious Eldrin wouldn't allow it.

"Is everything all right?" I ask, afraid of an unwelcome answer.

"Yes." Oakes looks confused by my concern.

Jaden relaxes a bit with my pointed question. "We were going to meet with the mage. I thought you might want to join us?"

"*Now?*" I pat down my messy hair and glance down at my wrinkled nightgown.

"We have enough time for you to get ready," Oakes says. "Would you like us to come back?"

“No, don’t go. Have a seat.” I gesture to the small table. “I’ll just freshen up in the bathing room.” I grab my new dress and hurry into the en suite. After a quick change, I come back into the room and begin to attack my hair with a brush. The tangles are tenacious. I bite back whimpers as my thick hair catches in the bristles.

“Come here.” Jaden jumps up, offering me his seat at my small dining table. He snatches away the brush as he nudges me to sit down.

“I can do it,” I protest, trying to take the brush back. “My hair has always been hard to manage. It isn’t like elves’ *glossy* locks.” Enviously, I eye his beautiful raven-black hair.

“I’ll have Eldrin deliver you some proper conditioner.” Jaden brushes my hair like an expert. “It will help with your tangles. There isn’t anything subpar about your hair. It just needs a little attention. It’s obvious that you have given it absolutely none.”

“Oh, I just thought I was defectively human.” Then I huff. “And don’t act as if I should know about hair management. It isn’t like servants get a lot of leisure time, so they can look gorgeous while scrubbing the floors.”

Jaden ignores my comment and braids my hair into an intricate plait. The luxurious feeling of having someone’s fingers confidently run through my hair makes me sigh, smile, and lean back into my chair.

Oakes watches the scene with a wistful expression.

“How do you know so much about hair?” I ask in a relaxed haze.

“I’m over a hundred and fifty years old. You can pick up a thing or two in that length of time.” Jaden chuckles.

“I suppose so.” I stand up when he’s done and turn in a full circle for them to inspect my transformation. “Do I look presentable enough for a meeting with a mage?”

“You are perfect,” Oakes says.

“Don’t be too nervous,” Jaden adds. “You don’t have to speak to her if you don’t want to.”

I bite my lip. Will I be able to keep all the questions bubbling inside me from slipping out?



The mage is already seated in the prince’s meeting hall when I arrive with Oakes and Jaden. The elf is of advanced age, assuredly over a thousand years, even if she doesn’t have a proper wrinkle in sight. However, I can read her extensive years just by the look in her eyes—eyes that seem to pierce my soul.

Reacting to the mage’s immense power, I fight off a cringe. What if she peers inside and finds me lacking to even be in the room? Would she send me away and prove to Oakes and Jaden that I don’t deserve their friendship?

Even as the prince’s advisors greet the mage, her attention never leaves me.

Oakes is the first to notice her keen interest in his mortal companion. “Honorable Mage Neven, I hope you don’t mind an unexpected visitor.”

“She wasn’t *unexpected*, now was she?” Mage Neven’s voice is devoid of how she feels about the intrusion.

I wonder if she also means she knew they would bring me along.

“This is Wynstelle. A guest of Prince Eldrin,” Jaden says. “Would it be all right if she were to sit in on our meeting? After all, the matter concerns her kind.”

“The mortal is welcome.” The mage waves me forward. “Come here.” She holds out her palm as an invitation for my hand.

I glance nervously at Oakes and Jaden. They nod for me to approach Mage Neven.

When I place my hand on the mage's, an electric spark stings me.

I jump. The mage's right hand covers our joined hands as she tightens her grip.

Neven stares at me for a long, chilling time that feels like it goes on for months.

Even Jaden and Oakes stir in their chairs, anxiety wafting off them.

"Wyn." Mage Neven smiles, though it doesn't reach her eyes. She uses my familiar name, although I haven't given it to her. "Your life has never been your own. But somehow, even with nothing that is yours, you have a quiet strength few possess. Your life has been in an upheaval recently, but that is not a prophecy. That is known. However, I see you have an epic journey of discovery ahead. It gives me no joy to tell you that your path hasn't been an easy one, nor will it be in the future. You will be tested again and again. But I believe you will overcome these obstacles. You must have faith in yourself to accomplish your purpose in this life."

Mage Neven falls silent and releases my hand.

"My purpose?" I ask. "What purpose could *I* have? I'm just a human servant."

"Every creature has a purpose." The mage explains, "But we don't know what it is until we look back at our existence at the end. Only then we can see everything in its proper context."

"Uh, well, I'll try to do my best with these tests you mentioned."

"I know you will." She winks.

"Thank you." I bow to the wise elf and sit down next to Jaden. My head spins with her psychic reading.

Mage Neven clears her throat and looks at Jaden and Oakes. "You were curious about the ghouls' unusual behavior as of late."

“Yes.” Jaden leans forward. “Do you have any explanation?”

The mage glances at me. “I perceived a spell upon them. I believe someone is trying to kill the mortals in our realm. Perhaps even *beyond* our realm.”

I tense.

Jaden looks at me and then back to the mage. “Is the spell still active?”

“My mage circle broke the enchantment. But that doesn’t mean the perpetrator won’t perform the spell again or use some other means.”

“Why would someone create such an enchantment?” Oakes asks.

“I believe this is just the beginning, and someone desires a war.” Neven nods to me. “With the mortal realm.”

“Another war is insanity.” Oakes throws his hands in the air. Then he recovers, taking in a deep breath. “And why would attacking mortals here cause a war?”

The mage shrugs, appearing indifferent, but something niggles that she knows more than she reveals. “It could also just be an elf still angry over the last war and the treaty.” She raises an eyebrow, staring intently at me. “About mortals living on this side.”

I get the feeling Mage Neven is suggesting the attacks are *my* fault—for being a mortal invading their lands.

“Should I return to the mortal realm?” I ask in a rush of words.

“No,” Jaden and Oakes say abruptly in unison.

“Wyn, I don’t believe you are in a position to make that kind of decision,” the mage says. “You are at the mercy of the Ryven Prince and the Royal Court.” She must catch my next thought and adds, “Running away now will solve nothing.”

I sit back in my seat, thinking over the seer’s words.

“There is another matter I wish to address with the prince’s advisors. Wyn, would you excuse us? I will only keep them for another moment.”

“Thank you for your advice, Honorable Mage.” I curtsy and step outside the meeting chamber.

What should I do now?



After a few minutes Jaden and Oakes exit and without acknowledging of my presence, hurry us along the corridors, their faces devoid of expression.

What terrible things did the mage tell them? I know better than to ask for specifics. If they excused me, then I’m not meant to know.

My curiosity gets the better of me though. What if it has to do with me? I move closer to Jaden and keep my voice low. “Is there something wrong?”

“What?” Jaden looks at me for the first time since their meeting. “No. As you now know, the mage’s advice and counsel are like a riddle, and we are trying to figure out what it means.”

Oakes rests his hand on my lower back. “It’s going to be all right. Mage Neven promised to stay vigilant in monitoring the ghoul’s behaviors.”

Their reassurances are meant to calm me, but I’m still worried about whoever is behind the powerful enchantment to kill my kind.

Should I convince Eldrin to let me leave the castle immediately? Am I putting every one of us in danger with my presence?

TRAPS

WYNSTELLE

I want to request books on enchantments to understand more about the ghoulish attacks. However, I worry the servants will think I am trying to put a spell on the prince. They are probably already suspicious about my continued presence. I am baffled by it myself.

When a servant brings my midday meal, I wonder if I imagine the irritation in the elf's eyes. Probably not. The enchantment on the ghouls has made it brutally clear mortals aren't welcome in this realm, and Oakes already told me the castle's inhabitants aren't pleased about me being here.

Perhaps Jaden will understand my interest and help me discover more about these enchantments.

"Wynstelle?" Eldrin calls coyly as he enters my room this evening.

"Hmm?" I look up from my book. I spent the rest of the day by myself in my room, reading the books Eldrin's guard delivered about the mortal realm.

As the prince enters, he holds something hidden behind his back.

Instantly, I grow nervous. I step backward, alarm on my face, looking for my escape.

Eldrin's smile falls when he sees my anxiousness.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“What are you hiding from me?” I ask with unease.

“A gift.” His brow furrows in confusion. By his bewildered tone, I know he expected excitement instead of my nervous reaction.

“I have never received a gift before, so I didn’t know what you did was a cue for a surprise gift.”

“What did you think I was holding?”

My face flushes with embarrassment, and I mumble my answer, “A weapon?”

“Stars and stones. How rough has your life been?” Then Eldrin blanches. “Do you really think I would use a weapon on you? That I would hurt you?”

“Uh, no.” I shake my head. Now I am insulting the prince. He might never forgive me. I hurry to explain. “I have been reading books about bloodthirsty mortals and violent conflicts for the last few days. I suppose it spilled over into my imagination.” I don’t know if Jaden or Oakes have told him of the mage’s discovery yet, so I keep that worry to myself.

Eldrin nods his understanding and walks over to where I sit down on the window bench. “I’ve been taken away by tales before. It makes sense you would be skittish, having been attacked by ghouls recently.”

“Yes. Twice!” I add as further proof that I didn’t mean to offend him.

Eldrin frowns and says, almost to himself, “Such strange behavior for ghouls.”

I’m relieved that he seems to have moved on from my assumption of him carrying a weapon. Though I do wonder why Jaden hasn’t told him of the mage’s consultation.

Eldrin shrugs off the thought of ghouls. “I have something that might lighten your spirits.” He takes my hand and guides me to sit on top of the bedcovers. When I settle, he reveals a glass container. A light emanates from its center. “A glow-faerie,” he says proudly.

He opens the ventilated lid.

The tiny female faerie flies out and zips around the room in a display of aerial acrobatics that I sense is an act and not out of joy.

Familiar with faeries, I am duly impressed with her skills. I open my hand, palm up, as an invitation for the faerie to land. The faerie's wings aren't much wider than my palm. "Hello," I greet.

The faerie bows. "Hello, mortal."

"I'm Wyn. What's your name?"

The faerie darts her eyes at the prince. "Lalo."

I note her subtly uncomfortable stance. "Eldrin, is this faerie kept here by one of your bargains?"

He pauses, considering his unfortunate answer. "Yes."

"Why is she being held here?"

"Her clan trespassed on the castle grounds. She is staying with us as restitutions for their crime," Eldrin mumbles.

I look at the faerie and ask, "Why was your family on the castle grounds?"

"Our flower, the Night Sprite, grows in the royal gardens. We couldn't resist the nectar."

Little ones often can't resist temptations. I turn to Eldrin. "Is it necessary to punish her for the craving to connect with her companion flower? It's in their core nature to seek it out. It was little more than a trap."

Eldrin blushes. "I didn't set it."

"But you took advantage of the opportunity." Disappointment is evident in my voice, and I do little to hide it. I can almost overlook how I've been asked to stay in the castle since I *had* agreed to Eldrin's terms so I could remain in Elfhome. But the faeries are meant to be in this realm, and they have a sacred connection to their flowers.

Eldrin jumps up.

I am momentarily worried I have pushed his indulgence with me too far.

Instead, he walks over to my window and opens the pane. “Wyn, you are correct. Lalo, you’re free of any previous contract with the royal courts. Therefore, I decree that you and your kind will be safe to visit *your* flowers in our gardens as you wish.”

Lalo looks shocked, standing in my hand. Once the faerie realizes it isn’t a trick, she nods to me and flies up to Eldrin at a respectable distance. “Thank you so much, Your Highness. We will *never* forget your generosity. My clan will sing songs of it.” She then promptly dives out of the window before the prince can change his mind.

Eldrin rubs his chin as he walks back to the bed, deep in thought. He stops next to me, not looking anywhere in particular.

“That was kind,” I tell him softly.

“No.” His voice is flat. “It was the proper thing to do. And unfortunately, I had to be reminded by you. Again.”

I wince, having bruised his ego. “Are you mad at me?” I ask, waiting for the repercussions to come crashing down.

Eldrin looks up to catch my nervous gaze. “At myself, not with you. Apparently, I didn’t learn my lesson about considering others.”

“But you fixed it. Don’t be too hard on yourself. It takes practice to change ingrained patterns. We are like rivers—it takes something significant to change our paths.”

“Wise analogy.” He nods and tilts his head with curiosity, studying me. “You seemed quite familiar with the little ones. Did you know some in Betonie?”

I smile wistfully at my days in their meadow, remembering their playful taunts about my swordplay. “I would bring them milk and bread to their grove.”

Eldrin’s mouth drops open. “They *allowed* you into their private grove?”

“Yes. They were wary of me at first, but I developed a relationship with the little ones when I was very young. I’m not special... I’ve read they are fond of younglings more than adults. So that’s all it is.”

“No. I could see Lalo’s reaction. They are likely all fond of you—something about you.” Eldrin sits down beside me. “But I would have thought they all would have turned a mortal away from their sacred space. Especially when you grew into an adult.”

“Oh, really?” I smile. “They must have really enjoyed the treats I brought them.”

“No. Lalo was instantly taken with you. She landed on your hand with no hesitation. The faeries enjoy your company.” Eldrin shakes his head. “They do not endure those unworthy of their favor.”

“I suppose they put up with me,” I say, picking at the bedspread. His adoration is embarrassing.

“There’s something marvelous about you.” He squeezes my hand. “Thank you for reminding me that a powerful ruler is also a fair one.”

“You decided to free Lalo and her family on your own.” I smile wholeheartedly. “See, you aren’t as *spoiled* as you make yourself out to be.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.” Eldrin snatches up my hand, brings it to his lips, and kisses my wrist. “I will let you sleep without me bothering you tonight. Until the morrow.” He nods and walks out the door.

I wonder if I have disturbed him more than he lets on.

SECRETS

JADEN

“*I*t’s Jaden.” My voice comes out deeper than usual as it filters through Wyn’s door. It’s a primal instinct deep inside me, wishing to claim my mate. If ever an elf had a beast inside them, I would be that elf.

Wyn calls softly, “Come in.”

At the window seat, she runs her fingers through her mussed hair and straightens on her perch.

I enter, holding a cloth bundle clutched tightly in my hands so I don’t run over and snatch her up in my arms. *Stars*, she is a vision, maybe more so with her sleepy bedroom eyes.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.” I glance at the tossed sheets and pillows on the bed. *Something* happened in her bed last night, and I hope it’s only her restless sleep and not Eldrin further claiming her innocence. I sniff the air to scent what transpired between Wyn and Eldrin the night before. He was here, but nothing more. *Good*.

“Did you fall asleep on the window bench?”

With a little frown, she answers, “Only for half of the night.”

Anger rises in my chest as I think the worst of Eldrin. Has he done something to upset her?

“Why didn’t you sleep properly?” I ask, concerned she might find me lacking—that I might not protect her. The mage’s warning has Oakes and me on edge.

“I just have too much tumbling through my mind.” Wyn stretches and yawns. She smiles shyly when she catches me staring hungrily at her.

I admire the grin that dazzles on her lips. “Would you like to get out of this stuffy room and join me for the day?”

“Oh, yes, please!” Wyn jumps up excitedly, ready to leave, and glances down at her nightgown. “I should change. I’ve already scandalized the castle enough as it is.”

“I suppose you have.” I unravel the bundle and hand Wyn a tunic and pants. “Wear this.”

She studies the ensemble with a quizzical look, probably trying to understand the change in attire. Then, with a shrug, she slips behind the changing partition and into the garments. “This definitely isn’t your shirt, much too small.” She steps out from behind the partition and giggles.

The top is snug around her full breasts and where it lands on her hips. The drawstring pants are loose-fitting to accommodate her luscious hips, and she rolls them up for her shorter stature.

I nod and catch her hand. “That works fine.”

I stay quiet on the way to my chambers. I have sent the guards outside my room away. Partly because Eldrin might discover I have Wyn alone with me and partly because I don’t want the guards to overhear what I plan for her. After closing my door, I turn to Wyn.

“On the mats,” I order, and smirk when she whips her head to study my face.

Then she glances over at the sparring area, and her eyes widen at the mats spread out on the ground. “What’s going on?” She doesn’t move to comply.

I snatch her hand in mine and lead her over to the mats. “I will not let you back into any realm without some defense

training. The mage predicted trials, and I will make sure you live through them.”

Wyn crosses her arms in defiance and eyes me with deep suspicion. “There isn’t any point to training a *human*.”

I cross my arms, mirroring her, and wonder if she fears my offer is a trap. I grit my teeth, knowing I haven’t won her trust completely, even though I have already overlooked her law-breaking blade. “Are you questioning my expertise?”

“I *question* your rationality. Unless you think I will not be allowed to remain in Elfhome, it makes no sense. I’m small and weak compared to elves and most other fae. Sure, I might throw them off me for a moment, but what then? The ghouls would have eaten me if you and Oakes hadn’t shown up.” Wyn’s eyes wander to the weapons wall.

I track to where she’s looking. “Ah! You want a weapon to even out the competition?”

“No. I *want* to be safe without the need to fight for my life.”

“I wish that for you, too.” I nod and rub my chin. “Unfortunately, that isn’t the case, not with what is happening lately. I will train you with a sword.”

“That isn’t allowed—”

“In secret.” I grin wickedly. “*Our* secret.”

Wyn puckers her lips to fend off a smile. “How do you know I can keep secrets?”

I chuckle. “I’m no fool. You did more than test the balance of a couple of daggers for Merlara. You practiced quite a lot, and with *swords*.” I assumed as much after her knife handling display and how she sliced the ghoul in Crowland.

Wyn’s eyes open wide, betraying herself. “Why would you say something like that?”

“Instinct.” I stalk closer. My hands itch to touch her, to feel the pulse of another rebellious heart beating in rhythm with mine. “You like to break the rules. Don’t you?”

Wyn gulps as she gazes up at me. “I would be suicidal if I’d done what you say.”

“Don’t worry, love. *I* enjoy breaking the rules. Stones below, how do you think I earned my position with the prince? As security, I have to know how to work around the systems and break rules, so I can recognize what to fix.”

“What needs fixing?” Wyn softens, looking curious. Her golden-brown eyes search my face. I wonder what she sees when she looks at me. A potential mate? A friend?

A dangerous problem to run from?

“Some rules need bending.” I pick up a sword and swing it in a tight circle with a twist of my wrist. “The law against humans carrying weapons is senseless. We have so few humans here, most of them petite and older females. Our realm is full of dangers for them. If an elf is an unprovoked threat to a mortal, then perhaps that elf should *have* to test himself against a mortal’s blade. It is more likely a human would only need to defend herself against an imp or now a ghoul.”

“But that is the problem, isn’t it? A ghoul’s safety has more value than my life.” Emptiness reflects in Wyn’s eyes. “When I think about that bias, knowing that I’m *not* equal, I consider returning to the mortal realm. But would my life have any value there?”

Knowing Wyn feels she’s a second-class citizen makes my heart ache.

“I see your point about the Elven attitude. I was shocked to witness your treatment in Crowland. It wasn’t like that before the war.” I set the sword back in its cradle and step in front of Wyn. My hands brace her shoulders. “Your life has more value to *me*. As for the mortal realm, I cannot guess what your experience might be.”

Wyn tries to shrug, but my powerful hands keep her in place. Her brow furrows, and she looks at me, confused.

“Break from my hold,” I order.

Her face ices over.

I smell her fear, laced with anger. “*Now.*”

Her hands snap up and grip my forearm. Wyn turns, drops to a crouch, and her hips bump up against mine. She throws her body forward, using herself as a catapult.

I flip over her shoulder and onto the floor.

Impressive.

“Good!” I jump up and clap my hands once. My body glows with the challenge. Wyn is more than I expected. “Where did you learn that?”

Wyn quirks her lip with my praise. “A book.”

“A book?” I ask in disbelief. My gaze travels up and down her curvy body. She’s fecking glorious, strong yet supple. “You have learned defense moves already?”

“A few, but I never could practice them.” She picks at her fingernails. I notice this is one of her nervous habits when she’s feeling vulnerable.

“You’ve *never* practiced that move?” I nod approvingly.

Without preamble, I grab her by the waist and flip her under me and onto the mat.

Wyn squeals as she lands on her back and squirms to get away.

I sit on her hips.

Wyn knees my backside, throwing me forward and off-balance. She latches her foot over my ankle, thrusts her hips up, and twists.

I roll off of her and onto my side.

Wyn is now between my legs, on top of me. She hesitates, unsure of how to get away.

“Now, wha—” she starts to ask.

I grab her arms and pull her toward my chest. She can’t move since I’m bracing her body to mine, pinning her arms to her sides.

“Don’t. Ever. Hesitate.” My hand comes up, lifting her face to look at me. “What was your instinct before you stopped to ask questions?”

“To knee you in the groin and then run.” She flushes pink.

Why is it so adorable that she blushes at the thought of battering my testicles? Goddess, I’d take a shot to the sack to win her. I almost chuckle as she averts her gaze, then ask, “Why didn’t you?”

She snaps her eyes to meet mine, trying to understand me. Her mouth parts in surprise. “I... I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Thoughtful.” I caress her cheek with my thumb. Her scars are now invisible. Part of me misses her badge of courage. However, the guilt-ridden protector in me is happy not to see the reminder of my failures. Wyn tries to squirm away again. Laying on top of my body, she’s making me grow harder with her heat and movement. Soon, it will be evident just how much she brings forth my primal urges.

She’s so close that I could almost kiss her pouting lips. Her mouth is full and luscious, practically demanding that I claim her. This lesson isn’t meant for seducing, though the scoundrel rogue within me argues it can be both.

I release Wyn so she can sit up, but I wrap my legs around her waist to stay in our fighting scenario. Her tiny yet strong hands push at my inner thighs, and I have to bite back a moan. What would her fingers feel like gripping my flesh? I imagine her clawing at my shoulders, demanding I fuck her harder. Goddess, I want to dive inside her sweet warmth and never leave.

I would give anything to be so tangled up with her we wouldn’t even know if the realms burned to the ground around us.

Her grunts of irritation bring me back to the moment.

As she tries to budge away from me, I instruct, “Your bones are fragile.”

“Way to boost my confidence,” she snarks.

I smirk at her sass. Fuck, she flames the fire within my soul. “Because they are fragile, I *recommend* hitting open-palmed, with the heel of your hand, as hard as you can. A fisted punch might break your fingers, especially with the hard-headed beings you may encounter.”

“Hmm. Seems I already know a few hardheaded males you speak of.”

Without warning, Wyn whips her hand out to hit me.

I’m quicker though, seeing the glint in her eye a second before she strikes. I catch her hand and spin her again so she is on the ground under me.

Wyn shouts her surprise and laughs. “Are we going to roll on the ground all day?”

My heart sings with her laughter. I have planned on a good portion of the day dedicated to rolling on the ground—in the name of self-defense training.

I put her through a few more escape exercises and find Wyn’s a quick study.

During my next attack position, I clasp her hands over her head with one hand, pinning her to the ground. My body presses against hers, hips nestled between her legs. It takes everything in me not to grind my aching cock against her heat.

Feck, I shouldn’t have done this. It feels too good. Too perfect. Like I belong here. Forever.

Wyn’s breath catches in her throat. Her eyes dilate and lock onto mine.

The scent of orange blossoms fills my nose. She is excited by me, too. Aroused.

If I were to slip my hand down between us, I’m certain I would feel her slick, readying herself for me to stake my claim, just as she has done to my heart.

She owns me.

All I wish to do is give myself freely over to her to do with me as she will.

Wyn shakes her head wildly, breaking our intense eye contact. Her breathing is ragged. She feels the bond that wants to snap into place and is resisting it.

With my other hand keeping her wrists pinned to the floor, I grasp her throat just below her chin. Her eyes widen, but her hips tilt into mine, striving for friction.

I whisper over the column of her slender neck, "It's alright, love."

She swallows heavily, still feeling nervous about our mating dance.

I chide myself, remembering she is inexperienced. I need to pull back before I frighten her. Besides, I'm forced to wait patiently for Eldrin to grow tired of her. Then I can court her.

She tugs her arms, attempting to break free. "I don't know how to get out of this hold."

Her voice is nervous, wondering what I have planned for her. I decide to lighten the mood so she can relax once again.

I tickle my fingers down her side.

Wyn lets out a peel of laughter. "What? Don't! It's too much," she pants.

With her frantic squirming, Wyn bucks me off once again. This time, she springs backward and stands. Winded from the exertion, she doubles over, holding her sides. "*What... the feck... was... that?*"

"Tickle torture." I chuckle, still on the floor. "I wanted to see how ticklish you were."

"Well, now we know." Wyn shakes her head, amused. Then her face shifts to sadness suddenly.

"What is it?" I'm on my feet in an instant, holding my arms open to her.

Wyn flinches and averts her eyes. Her skin pinkens again.

"Wyn?" I take another cautious step toward her, closing the distance. "Did I upset you?"

“I appreciate you trying to help me, but I’m done with... training.”

“Wyn?” I wait until she looks up at me. Our faces are so close, my breath catches when her golden-edged eyes lock with my gaze.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she says, like an apology.

There’s more to her resistance to my training. Should I push her or let her realize she needs to learn how to protect herself? She had been enjoying our sparring. She was even enjoying our mating dance. What shifted?

I don’t want to force her, but I can’t let her out in the world defenseless. “If you don’t learn my defensive techniques, you will need to carry your weapon. And you *must* use it if you need to.”

“It’s illegal—”

“I will convince Eldrin to grant you a special privilege.”

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” Wyn says, rubbing her arms as she hugs herself.

She needs comfort, and I will give it freely to my future mate. I wrap my arms around her and say, “And I don’t want to see *you* hurt.” I want my warmth to convince this brave human how much I care. How far I will go to protect her.

It will wreck me if anything happens to her.

I sigh.

How has she healed my wounded heart? I never thought I could love again. Yet, here I am, falling so hard that I might shatter when she doesn’t return my love.

My heart will break again as she desperately flees Ryven when Eldrin inevitably exploits her innocence and then throws her away.

But if she leaves, I will chase after.

Damn the consequences.

FREEDOM

WYNSTELLE

Over dinner, while the three elves chat about some meetings they have coming up, I poke at my food.

There's a lull in the conversation, and I ask, "Have any of you known other humans?"

"I met a male briefly during the war," Eldrin says. "But it was no more than a passing introduction."

I look at Jaden and Oakes. They are older and likely have come across a human or two.

"I was involved in the war," Jaden confesses. The words seem to upset him. "I was fortunate. Since my role with the prince sealed my fate, I was in charge of the prisons here, so they did not force me to the mortal world to slaughter them."

"Prisons?" I haven't heard about this part of history.

"Don't fret. We didn't torture or abuse them. It was more of a holding place for exchanging our captured." Jaden sighs. "Although the humans didn't spare many elves when they were captured. Most humans didn't wish to show mercy on our kind."

"I'm sorry," I say on behalf of the human race.

"You weren't there." Jaden smiles weakly at my attempt to claim the past. "This isn't your fault. None of us in this room

would have chosen that war, and we were all happy when it ended.”

“I know the circumstances weren’t ideal, but what was your impression of humans?” I ask.

Oakes clears his throat and answers, “I was in charge of interrogations. So I had a significant amount of interactions. Most were scared or angry because of their dire situation. But there were a few who I became acquainted with outside of the interviews. I would have called them a friend under different circumstances.”

I’m shocked that we aren’t all barbarians. “So, they aren’t *all* bad?”

“Not at all.” Jaden gives me a lopsided grin. “I’d say humans and elves are far more similar than different.”

“Oh, I see. I wouldn’t know.” I glance at Eldrin, thinking of what the mage said about an enchantment to rid Elfhome of humans. “Do you believe I should return to the mortal realm, since humans don’t seem to be welcomed in Elfhome?”

Oakes knows my intended question and turns to Eldrin. “Your Highness, Mage Neven has detected a spell on the ghouls to harm humans in our realm.”

Eldrin’s mouth drops open to reply and then darts his gaze at me. His face drains of color, his expression troubled. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“We just found out,” Jaden explains. “I had inquired after wondering about their strange behavior.”

“Did the mage determine who would commit such a horrible act?” Eldrin almost growls. His grip on the steak knife in his hand tightens, knuckles white.

I have never seen an elf this angry.

“No. Mage Neven said she would monitor the situation.” Oakes coughs and cants his head in my direction. “Neven said that she would focus her attention around the castle in particular.”

Eldrin's eyebrows shoot up in surprise, then his eyes dart to me again.

"I believe Mage Neven wants to keep your special guest safe," Jaden adds.

"Good. Good." Eldrin rubs his chin. "Next time, don't let something this important slide by, even for a moment."

"Yes, Your Highness," Oakes says to soften his error in keeping the news quiet too long.



That night, as I am about to surmise the prince has forgotten about me, Eldrin slips through the door. "I was wondering if you'd like to take a night walk with me."

Tired but wanting to explore the castle more, I nod yes, but remember the cooling weather and I don't have my cloak to keep me warm. "But it's chilly outside."

"I had your cloak cleaned and mended." He points to my wardrobe cabinet.

"Oh." I hadn't noticed it being there earlier. A brownie must have recently snuck in and left it. Instead of changing, I slide a dress right over my thin nightgown for extra warmth.

Eldrin holds my cloak out to place on my shoulders, then leads me down the halls.

As we enter his garden, I pull my cloak tight and stare up at the night sky. "I always loved to stargaze when I was a youngling."

"You don't enjoy it anymore?"

With a frown, I explain, "I'm usually exhausted by nightfall."

"Merlara worked you that hard?"

"I earned my keep." I shrug—proud of my abilities, but also a little sad. "What else could I do? I was hers to do with as she asked."

Eldrin squeezes my hand in understanding. His empathy seems to be developing because of my presence.

My head spins with the craziness of it all, and the thought reminds me I need to leave here soon. My attraction to all three elves is becoming too much to resist. Jaden's training session alone has me questioning the sexual taboo. Not to mention what Oakes' healing touch stirs up within me. And those are both innocent interactions. Aren't they?

"Are you sure you want to return to your old life?" Eldrin asks.

"I don't mind hard work. Also, Merlara can always use my help." I bend to sniff a delicate white rose that glows in the moonlight. "This adventure has been interesting, and you have been very generous, but I can't get used to this luxury. Soon, I'll need to wake up from this strange dream and return home, so I can finish out my days being productive, not a nuisance."

"You aren't a nuisance," Eldrin's voice sounds hurt, as if I had called *him* an annoyance.

"I fear that if I stay much longer, I will be a problem."

I wonder, would I say no if Eldrin asks to explore my body again? That might cause a stir in the castle, but should I care? Perhaps I should let him, so he will allow me to leave before my presence attracts any more negative attention. Then maybe I can have a pleasant memory to keep me warm throughout my lonely days after I leave them all behind.

"Hmm. I don't think your presence is a problem. On the contrary, I believe it's a solution." Eldrin stops walking and turns to face me. "But I understand your anxiety. I know Oakes doesn't approve of our friendship."

"I believe he is more concerned about how my presence appears to the rest of the castle, especially to your father." My shoulders pull forward in anticipation of him being frustrated.

"I don't care what anyone thinks." Eldrin waves the worries off with a gesture. "Or even care what Oakes thinks."

"But isn't Oakes your advisor?"

Eldrin frowns. “Yes. He wants what is best for me, but—”

“But he’s right, isn’t he?” I dare to interrupt.

“Well, in some ways, yes. However, I believe your presence is necessary. Not just for me. Elves have to get over their prejudice. With this news of a curse on your kind, I see the need for healing the wounds between our peoples more than ever. And you are the perfect mortal for them to become acquainted with. You will change their minds. They will see what I see, what the little ones see in you.”

“Oh, Eldrin... I don’t think so. Surely there is someone better suited for this position.” Feeling self-conscious, I study my shoes. “I’m not a diplomat or human noble or even properly educated. I’m just a servant. A bladesmith’s assistant.”

“No. You are perfect in every way.” Eldrin clasps my shoulders and waits until I look at him. “Tonight, I wanted to let you know that I’m freeing you from my contract. I release you. You may go wherever you would like. If you wish to return to Merlara, you are welcome to do so. Or maybe you desire to find a mate. However, what I hope to hear is that you accept my invitation to remain here with me indefinitely.” Eldrin quickly adds, “But if you wish to leave, then I insist upon one request.”

“What?” My mouth is suddenly dry.

“I wish for you to stay for the upcoming ball. I would like you to attend as my honored guest.”

“*Me?*” I’m not sure if I’m relieved by his request, or if I would have preferred he asked me to *rut*. “I shouldn’t be allowed to attend a formal function. I would only make a fool of myself *and* you!” I blurt out in a desperate attempt to thwart his request.

“You wouldn’t make a fool of us. Besides, I already commissioned a dress for you.” Eldrin pleads with his storm-colored eyes, “Will you stay with me—*with no obligation to do so*—and attend the party?”

“But you said I was free. So, *could* I leave right now?” I jut my chin out defiantly, calling his bluff.

Eldrin’s body tightens with misgiving, and after a few moments, he agrees. “Yes.”

I’m shocked he’s willing to release his hold on me. Perhaps he actually does want to grow and change to be more understanding of other’s needs. “And I don’t *have* to let you back in my room to explore my body to do so?”

“You don’t.” His eyes lower in despair.

Thinking about how I should handle him, I study my beautiful surroundings yet again.

I stretch out my reply until the tension is palpable. “Ugh. All right. I’ll stay... *until then*. But I’m guaranteeing you I will be an awkward duckling. I will probably hide in a dark corner.” Then I narrow my eyes, suddenly suspicious. “Am I meant to be some kind of joke at this ball?”

“Stars, no!” Eldrin takes my hands in his and kisses the tops of my wrists. “And thank you for saying yes.” His appreciative smile lights up the night.

“Thank you for granting me my freedom.”

“Well, I realized I was still wielding my power over you... even if all I wanted was your friendship. It wasn’t fair of me to say that you had the freedom to be honest with me when you were concerned I would seek retribution if you turned me away.”

I suck in a breath at his insight. “I’ve underestimated your depth.” I chuckle after seeing his smile, repeating the words he has used on me. “I’m sorry I neglected to see your soul and only saw you for your royal body.”

“So... you *have* noticed my body?” Eldrin says playfully, but his eyes sparkle with desire.

“It is hard not to when it is pressed up against me all night.”

He still has a hold of my hands and gently strokes my fingers. “Now that I’ve released you completely from our

contract, is my request to spend any future nights with you denied?”

“Uh. I don’t know.” I tilt my head, enjoying my first taste of freedom in my short life. “What is the incentive to allow you in my room?”

“I can think of a few benefits.” He gazes at my lips.

A heat pools low in my belly when I realize he wants to kiss me. The intent is as clear as if he speaks his request aloud. I stare at his full lips, wondering what a kiss might be like. I glance away, the urge too strong.

I shouldn’t encourage his affections, but he has given me my freedom, and I like the taste of it. But we are too exposed in the garden. He has taken me here to make me feel free, so I will want to stay. The tactic worked.

I tug on his hand. “Maybe you can list these incentives somewhere more private.”

“Like your room?” He cocks an eyebrow seductively.

RELEASED

ELDRIN

*W*ynstelle and I hurry back to her chambers. Once I have closed the door, I turn to find Wyn right in front of me, her breasts grazing my chest. I almost gasp in surprise at her proximity, eagerness dancing in her eyes. Shocked by her captivating openness with me, I collapse back against the door, knees weak. Surely, she will be my undoing.

I curse myself for approaching Wynstelle with a levy for her freedom. But I am a spoiled idiot, using my influence. Isn't that how the elves do things, especially royalty? Negotiations, bargains, trades. But she isn't an elf. That is *why* I wanted to meet her. Why I desire her. And now, why I want her—completely.

But I will be grateful for any tiny morsel she gifts me, be it her thoughts or a simple touch.

How is it this mortal woman makes me want to be a better male? I don't know, but it's happened. Her very presence makes me question my life and every single choice I've made, or will make. I could have almost any female in the realm, whether they are available or not, but now I believe I will only be happy with Wynstelle for the rest of my days.

Wyn seems to see me for me, not as a prince—not the powerful future leader, but just a male. A male who might bring her pleasure.

I had known from the moment I first set eyes on her that she deserves more than what I offered her with my bargaining. Oakes had said much of her courage and spirit. And I agree. Wynstelle is also resilient and intriguing.

I desire, more than anything else, to *earn* her respect. I have never gone out of my way to earn anything before—it has always been given freely.

But this new feeling is invigorating. I'm excited about being challenged. I *want* to be challenged. Wynstelle is the only one who has ever evoked that desire within me.

I fear I will never deserve her affection. My heart will accept nothing less than my best effort. Yet, I'm young and stupid and selfish. Jaden and Oakes don't need to tell me. I can see it in their eyes. They expect me to mess this all up. Perhaps they are correct. But what if... what if I could make all three of them proud of me?

“What were those incentives you mentioned?” she asks with a cocky smirk.

Feck. I need to taste that smile.

I lean down and gently clasp my large hands on the sides of her face. I wait, hovering for the approval I need to proceed. She shifts toward me ever so slightly. Then I press my lips to hers, soft and sweet.

Wyn moves in again for another, chasing my lips.

I oblige, and our kisses become more urgent.

Why does she have to taste like the sweetest, most forbidden fruit?

My hand skims down around her neck and draws her closer. Then, in a moment of chivalry, I pull away to pause and make sure she is all right. I look into her eyes and see only desire. “Was this your first kiss?”

Wyn flushes bright red and avoids my gaze. “Is it *that* obvious?” She covers her mouth with her hand. She laughs at herself, despite her embarrassment.

“No. It wasn’t obvious at all.” I gently move her hand and give her a soft peck on the lips. “You are a natural, but you mentioned you never experienced... *pleasure* with a male, so I just wondered... But now, perhaps, if you want, I’ll leave with this lovely gift you have blessed me with and treasure it always.”

“Don’t leave.” Wyn clings to my shirt before I can move.

I trail my fingertips along the sides of her face. “I’ll take things between us very slow and only do what you are comfortable doing. I want you to tell me what *you* want. Just make me aware if anything is too much. I don’t want to hurt or upset you ever again. I’ll stop at *any* point. Even if you said yes to it initially.” I wait for her response, and when she just stares at me, I ask, “Agreed?”

“Yes. I’ll let you know.” Her golden-brown eyes lock onto me with an intensity that seems beyond her years to master. “Can we kiss a bit more?”

“I would very much like to accommodate that request.” I start with her mouth and then pepper kisses down her neck.

Wyn lets out a moan. She arches her back, which moves my hand lower, and I understand I have approval without asking. Encouraged by her response, I slide my hands down over her ample breasts.

Goddess bless, Wyn is perfection.

She runs her hands over my chest and then tugs at my shirt hem. “It seems quite unfair you’ve seen me completely naked, and I haven’t even seen your chest.”

In a flash, my shirt is gone.

“Oh!” Wyn squeaks, then licks her lips as if she were hungry to taste me. She trails her hands over the solid, muscular planes of my chest. Her touch is like wildfire, blazing and awakening my senses.

Have I ever felt more alive? No, I have not.

My body rouses as it never has before. My soul is drawn to her like it recognizes its mate. Could she be? I know the

answer the moment I ask.

Her eyes twinkle, and suddenly, she becomes bolder. Does she sense the connection, too?

“You’re... *impressive*.” Her eyes eat up my broad chest and then drop to my pants. “What’s the rest like?”

My heart stutters. Then I remind myself of my promise to move slowly. However, I desperately need to please her. I must give her anything she asks for. “Have you ever seen a naked male?”

“Just illustrations in books, but not in person.”

“I can show you,” I say, my voice raspy with need.

Wyn sucks in a breath and freezes in place.

Before I move again, I assure her, “I expect nothing from you if I show you. Would you like to see me?”

“Um, yes, please.” She stands back as if my body is on fire, and from the desire smoldering in my groin, I might be. “Only if *you* are comfortable showing me.” She smiles coyly. “I don’t want you to feel like I’m making you.”

I chuckle at her friskiness. “Oh, I think you know you are *making* me in the best kind of way.” I kick off my shoes and stockings, drop my pants, and step out of them.

Wyn staggers backward as I approach, eyes glued to my jutting cock. “That’s supposed to fit inside a female’s body?” She almost yelps when my member bobs as I move closer.

“It *does* fit.” I stop walking toward her and allow her to come back to me. “And it feels good for both parties. Or so the screams of ecstasy have told me.” Oh, how I want to hear the sounds she makes when she lets go.

Wyn pulls her focus away from my needy cock to look me in the eye. “May I... touch it?” she whispers and reaches out her hand.

I nod, and she hesitantly skims her finger down my length. “It’s so soft, but hard at the same time.”

Her caresses are too light, causing me to press into her touch.

“Go ahead and explore. Run your entire hand down my shaft. You won’t hurt me.” I claim her mouth again.

Encouraged by my excitement, Wyn circles her fingers over my cock and strokes up and down. I moan and brace myself with my hands on her hips as she experiments with her technique. She is full of surprises. How does she know just how to touch me? My breathing comes out ragged with her ministrations. “Are you *sure* you’ve never done this before?”

She giggles, pride shining in her eyes. “This feels good?”

I crash into her, kissing her fiercely as my answer. My hands move down around to her low back, then to her ass, kneading the flesh under her dress. I press my body against hers, relieving some of the tension in my groin. “Now *you* have too many clothes on,” my voice rumbles in my chest, slowly shifting her backward.

The back of Wyn’s legs bump up against the bed. “Are you still willing to listen to what I need? You seem sort of... uh, *excitable*.” Wyn braces her hand over my chest.

“You stir my senses.” I grin and suck in a breath. “But your wish is my command. I can behave.”

“Get on the bed,” she orders.

My eyebrows shoot up at her command. My cock jumps with approval at being ordered around. Her dominance arouses me far more than it should. I’d take her commands any time of the day and all night. I envision her demanding me to crawl under the dining table and lick her cunt while Oakes and Jaden watch as her face contorts with pleasure.

“Yes, oh, *formidable* one.” I bow and crawl onto the bed while my cock aches to slide into her wet heat.

Wyn grins with satisfaction when I lay at the center of the bed.

Fully clothed, she comes up beside me. I reach out to her.

“Hands to yourself,” she scolds.

I retract my arms back to my sides.

For a moment, she looks unsure of our dynamic and asks, “May I touch you?”

“Anywhere and everywhere you’d like.”

Wyn smirks mischievously, then trails her hands up and down my body, overtly avoiding my groin, and continues skimming up and down my legs.

I hum with pleasure while she explores every inch of my skin and watches my response. No one has ever paid this much attention to knowing me and where I like to be touched. I vow to do the same for her.

Her teasing touches are my undoing. Would she tie me down and torture me until I exploded with my need for her? Goddess, I want that. I want her to take control of her pleasure and ride my cock. I want her to own me—body and soul.

Coming back up, Wyn strokes my member as her other hand runs through my long, blond hair. I close my eyes in bliss, falling deeper for her every moment and with every touch.

My muscles flex, resisting the urge to reciprocate.

Nestled next to me, she nuzzles my neck. Then her fingers trace over my pointed ears.

I buck with the overpowering sensation, my cock throbbing for her.

“Goddess, Wyn!” I almost grab her and fuck her right then.

“Oh? Is that a... sensitive spot?” she asks innocently, but I’m certain with the glint in her eyes that she knows it is.

I purr. “You’re killing me, Wynstelle.”

“I suppose I could make things a bit more even. Stay where you are.” She hikes her dress over her head and removes her undergarments. She stands gloriously naked, smiling at me.

“You are so beautiful it hurts,” I whisper reverently.

My eyes widen as she climbs back up and slides her body over mine. She winds around me like a snake. My hips instinctively buck, wanting to find her center. But she moves in such a way as to bask in our skin-to-skin contact and not allow me to slip inside her. My cock hardens more with the tension of not having permission to touch her soft skin.

When the anticipation is more than I can bear, I groan as if in pain. “*Now*, you are killing me.”

RELEASE

WYNSTELLE

*S*lide my naked flesh over Eldrin's hard muscles. Why does it feel like the most luxurious feeling ever?

He groans as though I've injured him. "Now, you are killing me."

I laugh, taking charge and kissing him deeply. His sandalwood scent, warm and earthy, sweeps over me and only flames my need for him. I never expected to feel this alive. My rebellious side wants to see how far our exploration will go. All my senses are awakened, and my skin burns everywhere we touch. Between my legs, my center throbs, craving something I know only he can give me.

"Why does it feel so good?" I ask, dragging my hardened nipple over his chest, continuing to tease him.

"It could feel better if I were allowed to touch you." He begs with his eyes.

A wicked grin stretches across my face. "I must be a bit naughty, since I enjoy watching you follow my orders. And you look amazing when you squirm." I glance down at his thick member and say, "I think you like this game too."

"Feck, I do. I want to go slowly with you, my wicked mortal, but you're making it extremely difficult for me not to flip you on your back and take you right now." His voice is

tight, demonstrating his need is real. “Goddess, why does it arouse me so much to have you give me orders?”

“Because it’s new?” I suggest, amused that he desires me like this.

He truly appears to want me *for me*. Not just because I’m a novelty. Perhaps I’m kidding myself. Yet, the way his eyes light up when he looks at me—not just my body—*me*, I’m beginning to think he really wants me around for more than a rutting.

“Speaking of new...” Eldrin growls low as I skim my hand over his engorged cock. “You still haven’t been kissed everywhere that you need to be.”

I pull back my long, untamed hair. “Like right here?” I point to my neck.

He lifts his head, kissing and nibbling my throat. His eyes drop to my breasts that currently press against his chest.

I arch up and allow him access to my nipples.

He kisses and gently sucks on one.

I gasp at the thrilling sensation. “*Stars!*”

“You like that?” Eldrin flicks my nipple with his tongue. “If you lay back and relax, I can kiss you everywhere that needs attention.”

That sounds wonderful, so I roll off of him.

He moves onto his hands and knees, hovering over my body. He dips down and laves my other breast. His large hand slowly moves up and down my body, causing me to undulate with need.

His lips travel lower until his face is at the tops of my thighs.

“Will you open for me?” His voice is pleading. “I need to taste your honey.”

I jerk my head up to stare at him in shock. “You can’t *kiss* me... there.”

“I want to taste you. I *need* to, Wyn. Please, my sweet.”

My face flushes with embarrassment. Oh, goddess, I want him to show me what pleasure is, but this seems so wrong. “But—”

“I can bring you to release with just my kiss. That is... if you want to experience it.” Eldrin rubs his cheek on my thigh. “Don’t worry. I’m not asking for my release. This is about your freedom, *your* pleasure. But if you don’t want this, I can stop—”

“How do I... *release*?” The thought of orgasming for the first time leaves me short of breath. Will I be able to do it?

“I expect it should come to you naturally. It feels like a wave that crashes over you, and you don’t have a care in the realm.” Eldrin strokes my hip, urging me to relax. “The key is to just let go and *feel*. Get lost in my touch.”

I slowly open my legs to him.

He kisses my inner thighs, leisurely moving closer to my center. I jerk when his kisses reach my sex. Still, my legs open wider, needing more. Craving more.

Eldrin licks me entirely. “You’re more delicious than any dessert.” He dips his face into me, ravaging my sensitive flesh.

I tense with the thrill. I feel as if I’m edging toward a cliff.

Eldrin continues to suck and kiss me with more pressure and intensity.

My body flushes. An impending wave mounts within me.

An elf, a prince, no less, is between my legs, worshiping me for *my* pleasure and release. How has life brought me here? I shouldn’t be doing this. Why does something so wrong feel so good?

His hands massage my legs, working their way up, then his skilled fingers slip through my wet center. This time it’s more than a welcomed sensation. I need his fingers to dip inside me. I want more than that, though. My body screams that it must be his cock to massage my channel.

I feel the strange sensation of him sucking on my core's apex. Then his thumb replaces it and his tongue slips inside me.

"Eldrin!" I can't believe how deeply he's penetrating me. "How long is your tongue?"

He hums and wiggles it, and the intense vibration makes my back arch off the bed. I lift my hips, needing more. Eldrin gives it to me and works my sensitive bud of flesh with his fingers while thrusting his tongue deep inside.

A fire burns up through my body to my toes and fingers until I feel like I'm about to combust into ashes.

"I'm going to pass out," I whimper.

He pulls out for a moment to tell me, "Let go." His breath on my flesh throws me over the edge. "Allow the bliss to come."

With his words, my body clenches and bucks. The wave of pleasure pulses through every inch of me, centered where his mouth tastes my essence. My channel walls clamp down on his tongue.

I might be shouting. I might be trembling. I might be dying, and I'm fine with death if it feels this good.

I suck in a breath... proving I'm not dead.

Once my body settles, I discover I have lost my ability to hear. Eldrin is saying something, but I can't focus. "Huh?"

He kisses his way back to my mouth, paying extra attention to my overly sensitive breasts. "Did you enjoy that?"

"I feel light and heavy all at once. My skin tingles." I pant. "No wonder people mate."

Eldrin pulls the covers up around us and snuggles next to me. After kissing my cheek, he closes his eyes and strokes my side. It seems he's ready to sleep. So he really *isn't* going to pressure me into satisfying his own needs?

I touch his throbbing cock that's poking into my hip. "What about your release?"

“I meant what I said. This is about you.” His hand lazily caresses my breasts. “I have had thousands of releases. I can make one occasion *not* about myself.”

“That is *very* generous of you.” I tease, feeling as if I can die happy knowing the pleasure he has given me.

“It is *extremely* generous because I want you more than you can imagine.” He playfully pinches my nipple, and I yelp in surprise. Yet another wave of desire floods my senses.

“Sleep now, beautiful.” Eldrin brushes the loose strands of my hair away from my face. “Or the little self-control I have will falter.”

Kissing his pouting lips, I confide, “I’m debating if I want you to fail.” I stroke his temple, soothing him. “But I think I will just allow you to sleep with the satisfaction of a job well done.”

He chuckles, closing his eyes, while I caress his face until he falls asleep.

MORNING AFTER

ELDRIN

When I wake, my sweet mortal is still asleep beside me.

How have I won the trust of this beauty? I know in no way do I deserve her, not yet. But I am going to prove myself to Wynstelle. I will make her so delirious with happiness and pleasure that all the mistakes I have made will be forgiven. That is my plan. I will shower her with gifts and affection until the nonsense of her returning to that foundry, to a brutal life of labor, is an absurd notion.

Admiring her curves covered in only a thin sheet, I want to pick up my paints again and capture this moment on canvas. She is the perfect subject—soft lines and glowing radiance. Yet, no painting, not even by a master, would come close to capturing the living masterpiece she is.

I want to seize all of our precious moments and treasure them forever—her unexpected wisdom, her easy laughter, her moans of desire.

No one I know laughs the way she does, with such pure delight. I suspect Jaden is the most like her in temperament, but he has seen too much to laugh like Wyn does, like the faeries do. And the little ones see in her what I do, that she is a pure and wise soul.

Goddess. I don't want to mess this up. I rub my eyes and feel the sting of emotion. My father is probably correct—I am good for nothing. Worse than that, I make things worse.

I've already made one mess with Wyn the day we met. Jaden and Oakes watch on and wait for me to fuck up again. They know me better than anyone, so it shouldn't surprise me. They have been the victims of how I've messed up in the past. I hurt Jaden years ago. No, it goes far beyond hurt. I broke him, all because I was a selfish, jealous prick. I don't think he will ever truly forgive me. Not that he should.

Taking a deep breath, I remember what Wyn said. That I can be better. That I can *do* better. I just need to step outside of my ego once in a while. I can do that. I've already proved that to her a few times now.

Her faith in me, even after what has transpired between us, is humbling. It gives me the strength and willpower to be a better elf.

This is my chance to truly earn someone's love and affection.

I just have to win her over, and I can bring her happiness for the rest of her days.

Still fast asleep and with a soft whimper, Wyn rolls over on her stomach, her silken back exposed.

I touch her soft skin, meaning to wake her up and give her a sweet kiss. But as I graze my fingers between her shoulder blades, I notice an unevenness. Intrigued, I move closer to study what it is in the dim light of the room.

Upon inspection, I see her skin has a strange indentation—some sort of scar or colorless birthmark. Unusual markings like this are often indicative of an individual who was marked by fate at birth for an important role in life.

Or... it's made with a magical binding.

I shudder. Could someone have placed a curse on her? But what could be gained by cursing an isolated human servant? That makes no sense. It's probably nothing, but what if it isn't?

Quietly, I slip out of bed and dress, careful not to wake Wyn. I hurry out of the room, deeply troubled by what I have seen.

MARKED

WYNSTELLE

I hear the prince reenter my room, but I don't stir. He is not alone.

I crack my eyes open just enough to see Oakes, but without letting them know I am awake.

Eldrin draws near to the bed and whispers, "Right there. On her middle back."

Oakes' hushed voice is tight with anger. "What did you *do* to her last night?"

"Nothing she didn't fully consent to do," Eldrin hisses. "We'll talk about it later. For now, examine her mark."

Mark?

I want to bolt up and ask, but I know I need to overhear what they might not tell me directly.

Oakes touches the middle of my naked back, electrifying my skin. I restrain myself from reacting to the jolt I feel.

Why do I have to be attracted to him, too?

Fortunately, I don't have to be embarrassed since he has seen me undressed. My heart deflates when I realize he must be mad at me for allowing Eldrin into my bed.

I hate the thought of upsetting him, but he didn't offer me a way out of this situation either. I remind myself he knows

I'm in a tricky spot.

Yet, I can never tell him how much I enjoyed my night with his prince.

Oakes runs his fingertips over the center of my back for a second. "Hmm."

"What does the symbol mean?" Eldrin asks.

"It might be nothing. Or it might be..." Oakes hesitates. "I'll investigate. Perhaps Mage Neven might shed some light on this. But it doesn't feel new."

I hear Eldrin lead Oakes out of the room.

As soon as Eldrin shuts the door, I sit up and ask innocently, "Did someone come for you?"

"Oakes came by." Eldrin walks over to my side of the bed and smiles. "We should eat breakfast now. I have a lot to do today."

"Are you all right?" I slip on my dress and run my fingers through my untamed hair.

"Of course. Why?"

"You seem... *tense*." I brace myself. "Do you regret what happened last night?"

"No." Eldrin captures me in an embrace. "Do you?"

I shake my head and wonder why my mystery mark unsettles him.



I am quiet during breakfast. The three males talk about the upcoming festivities, and I pay no mind to their discussion. Instead, I worry about the mark on my back, the looming threat Eldrin's interest in me has caused, and the ghoul enchantment to harm humans.

Oakes is convinced my presence in the castle will bring trouble.

What does my mark mean? Before this morning, I didn't even know I had any sort of mark. It's in the one place I can't really see or feel. Now its discovery has made me ready to heed the warnings about my unwanted presence and run.

I shake my head ever so slightly. What am I still doing here? I should have left the moment Eldrin gave me the freedom to leave. Why did I invite him into my room? What if the mark is a curse? Will the elves kill me if they think the mark is a danger to Eldrin? What if I unwittingly harm him?

I am startled when I hear my name being called. I glance over at Eldrin. His eyes don't have any suspicion or hatred in them... *yet*. But what if Oakes' research reveals something awful about my mark?

"Unfortunately, you will have to spend your day with Jaden." The prince laughs when Jaden presses his lips into a thin line.

Returning my focus back to the conversation. "I don't want to be a bother. I can entertain myself with the books in my room."

"If she doesn't want to—" Jaden protests.

Eldrin interrupts, falling back into his commanding voice, "Nonsense. You can take Wynstelle down for her dress fitting while Oakes and I take care of the arrangements for the event."

The prince stares at Oakes, who isn't eating. "I can't believe you're shying away from your food."

Oakes doesn't respond.

Is Oakes not eating because he is upset about seeing me naked with Eldrin?

Or maybe he has lost his appetite because my mark means I *am* cursed. Is he trying to figure out a way to remove me without drawing attention to the fact that they allowed a cursed female so close to the royal heir?

DELEGATION

OAKES

Eldrin and I wave goodbye to Wyn as Jaden escorts her to her dress fitting.

I sense a nervousness within her that wasn't there the day before. I don't probe deeper than that, attempting to allow her some privacy. However, I suspect she's nervous about a number of things. One of which is Eldrin pushing her into a sexual experience last night. Or she may be nervous about attending a ball full of the most powerful elves in our realm.

I hope she didn't overhear Eldrin and I speaking of her mark.

Stars and stones, I hope it's nothing. Fortunately, it is inconspicuous and hopefully the dress maker won't notice the slight unevenness in her skin.

Perhaps Wyn has a simple explanation. She did work in a foundry, after all. Isn't it plausible that it's just an old scar?

"Out with it," Eldrin grumbles.

I startle, realizing I've been standing and staring after the place Wyn disappeared from our sight. "What do you mean?"

"You are going to lecture me about Wyn." He crosses his arms defensively. He's expecting me to admonish him, but I doubt he will listen to a damned thing I say.

“Do you deserve a lecture?” I ask, cocking my brow and waiting for an honest answer.

He bristles, but quickly defuses his irritation and lets his arms drop to his side again. He moves to leave, and we briskly walk the short trip to his personal chambers. After we are inside, beyond prying ears, he answers, “I hope I don’t deserve a reprimand. Oakes, you must believe me when I say that I’m trying to be my best with her.”

“Did you force her or coerce her in any way?” I ask softly.

“No. If anything, she tried to pressure me into more. But I told her we should take things slowly.” He shakes his head with a wistful grin. “She’s more than I’d ever hoped for. Goddess, she’s a dream come true.”

I pace slowly, working up to what I need to say. “Your affection for her hasn’t gone unnoticed. Commander Turgon questioned me last night about the nature of your relationship.”

Eldrin looks properly alarmed by this news, as he should be. Turgon is his father’s right hand and I sense only cruelty brews under his skin. He’s even more arrogant and heartless than the king. No good will come from being in his sights.

“Turgon? Feck! What did you tell him?” Eldrin fists his hands at his sides.

“I told him the same thing that I’ve been telling all the rest of the castle—that this is only some short-lived fun with a mortal.” I watch his face as it contorts into disgust. Does he really expect there can be something more than a few evenings of pleasure?

Finally seeing the implications of his actions, Eldrin pulls on his white blond hair, yanking it from its tie. “Oakes, I don’t believe it’s as simple as that. I really care about Wyn. I want her like no other.”

I sigh wearily. Perhaps Jaden or I might be allowed a relationship with Wyn, but not the crown prince—not for any longer than a few days of harmless fucking. “Your father

won't permit this... *situation* to go on much longer. Especially with the delegation coming tomorrow."

"But I plan to make Wyn an ambassador for human relations." He throws his hands in the air as if I'm dense.

"As I've said before, that's not a viable option. She has no qualifications, no ties to the mortal realm. He will see through that flimsy excuse to keep her at your side."

"Then what can I do?" he asks.

"Let her go. Don't visit her room anymore at night. Have this ball, but don't show her much attention."

"I don't think I can let her go," Eldrin whispers. He walks over to his window and stares out at the forest beyond the castle walls.

"You can't keep her for yourself. You are likely putting her in danger."

"Isn't she already in danger in Elfhome? The ghouls might just be the first assault on humans. No, she is safer here... with us."

"Jaden or I could become her Elven keeper, though I doubt anyone would believe you weren't still pursuing her."

"Yes, could we do that?" Eldrin looks eager.

"Since you granted Wyn her freedom, we'd have to get Wyn to agree to it."

"It would only be for show. She could be free with you or Jaden as her keeper."

"So you would burden her and make her carry the weight of this secret?" I ask.

He rubs his eyes and growls with frustration. "I can't think. Let's just get through the ball and we can come up with a solution will work to protect her. That's the most important part."

"Even if leaving might be the best for her?"

“I don’t think it is. She belongs with us,” he says, stepping closer and searching my face. “Don’t you feel like she has healed something within us? Within me?”

“I can’t deny that she is a bright spot of my day, and it seems Jaden enjoys her company, too.” I sense Jaden more than enjoys Wyn’s company, but I won’t admit to our more than passing interest in her. Even though he claims he wishes to be more thoughtful, Eldrin is a jealous male. “She seems to compliment our small group, but that doesn’t mean she will find acceptance amongst the rest of the elves in this castle or beyond.”

“First things first. We need to get her to stay and remove Turgon’s interest in her presence.” Eldrin grabs my shoulders and looks me in the eye. “Will you help me?”

“There is an easier way to remove the target from her back,” I remind him.

“No. I can’t let her go.” His grip on my shoulders tightens. “The very thought of it throws me into a spin.”

“I thought you said you were trying to be less selfish. Your desire to keep her shouldn’t take precedence over her safety.” I soften my tone and say, “We’ll send her back to Merlara’s and you can sneak off to visit her occasionally.”

“And lose precious days, hours, minutes I might have with her?” Eldrin releases his hold on my shoulders and paces. “You know how it is with her kind. She will be gone within a blink of an eye. And I will have lost something too precious.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration. He has a fucking point, although I don’t want to encourage his behavior. All three of us might allow too much time to slip by between visits, and Wyn would be gone before we even realized it.

“The only way I’ll support this is if she willingly agrees to your offer of accepting Jaden or me as her keeper,” I remind him. “But she won’t be free anymore, not even if you grant her special privileges. She’d have to agree to become a servant again. It will look suspicious if she sits with us as an equal in our dining hall and then gets caught sneaking away with you.”

The idea of owning Wyn turns my stomach. I had hoped Eldrin would tire of her—before she captured the attention of the castle, Turgon, and the king. My stupid heart wishes she would have accepted my affections. No matter what, that is only a dream now.

Besides, I could never have a proper Elven mating bond with her. Even if the binding magic worked, it would probably kill me when I lost her. I would go mad with grief. It seems that is the case with our king. He hasn't been the same since losing his mate. He was one of the strongest, most controlled elves I knew, but he lost all sense of kindness after Eldrin's mother died.

"We will make it work," Eldrin promises as if he could make such a claim.

"I think she should leave—" I put my hands up when he protests. "Just for a little while—a month or a year to make the castle forget about her. Then we can bring her back."

Eldrin shakes his head and slashes his hand in the air, a sign he won't go along with my plan. "No, you only suggest that in hopes I will forget her."

"Are you worried that I might be correct?" I ask without judgment in my tone.

I eye him intently, watching and sensing his emotional reaction, reading him as I can. Of course, I have felt a shift in him, or at least the yearning to be different, but elves are often too stubborn to change long term. Our personalities are strong from birth, and only huge catastrophes can change us.

When he doesn't answer me, I prod him, "Are you worried you might lose interest if she weren't directly under your nose?"

"I..." His blue-gray eyes lock onto me, imploring me to understand. "I don't think I'll ever forget her."

"She is special. That is plain to see. But that's exactly the problem. Everyone can see that there is something different about her. They can see it reflected in *your* eyes."

“So I’m not the only one?” he asks, sounding more forlorn than I’ve ever heard him.

I’m curious why this would be the issue that rattles him. Does he truly believe he was the only one to see the gem in the rough? That he had discovered a disguised treasure? Does he believe *I* didn’t recognize her beauty and worth the first moment I laid eyes on her?

I’d kick myself again for not running away with her before we ever reached the castle if I thought it would do any good. But it’s too late. Wyn has caught the attention of the elves. Royal elves, who would do anything to eliminate someone who shines brighter than they do.

“No, Eldrin, you are not the only one who has eyes.” Sadness fills my entire being, knowing Wyn needs to leave us behind and find a life far from here.

And I fear I will never be happy again. Perhaps none of us will.

DRESS

WYNSTELLE

Jaden silently escorts me through the maze-like corridors to the other side of the castle. He seems exceptionally quiet this morning. Perhaps he's still frustrated at me about putting an end to my defense training. If he only knew my forbidden desires grow with every touch and word we share.

His playfulness only draws me in more. His easy smile, paired with his caring attitude, makes it hard for me to breathe around him—not to mention his gorgeous violet eyes, roguish black hair, and stunning physique.

A prince could possibly get away with disregarding a sexual taboo, but my interest in Jaden would never be allowed. Not that I think he wants a sexual experience with me, so why do I pine for someone I can't have? My feelings need to be shut away. Perhaps it's better that he is being distant with me now before I get attached. Though, I fear it's too late.

Or maybe his reserved attitude is because Oakes told him about the mark on my back, and now he wants nothing to do with a potentially cursed human.

I worry maybe he regrets covering up the dagger I brought into the castle. Perhaps he now sees me as a threat.

Or maybe he's simply rescinding his offer to be my friend since he's grown bored with me. Likely, he's realized how

foolish it is to befriend a mortal servant when he's a royal advisor.

I squeeze my eyes shut and take quick, angry steps, reprimanding myself for being so self-absorbed. These males seem to bring that negative trait out within me. They bring out a lot of new emotions and sensations.

Jaden's quietness could have nothing to do with my existence. After all, they chose him for the prince because of his passion. A certain amount of moodiness must come with that package, and his mood has definitely shifted. There are so many other things he must deal with in a day. Perhaps he's irritated that he has to escort me to a silly dress fitting instead of doing his job, working out security for the arriving delegation.

"Who will attend the party?" I ask, trying to engage him to see if it's really me he's upset with.

Without breaking his long, determined strides, Jaden observes me from the corner of his eye before answering, his tone even. "All the nobles. From *all* the fae kingdoms."

"Oh." I bite my lip. "Goddess, I will be extremely out of place amongst the elite elves from the entire realm. If Eldrin grants me any special attention in front of the most influential people in the kingdoms, he will cause a stir and create a lot of problems for himself. This is a terrible idea." I spin on my heel mid-stride and hurry back toward my room.

Jaden grabs me by my waist and turns me to him. He presses my body against his, my toes barely touching the ground.

Thank goodness we are alone in the hallway, so no one can see us or guess why he's holding me like this. Although, I also wonder what he's doing.

Lifting me slightly, he carries me a short distance to a darkened alcove. I suppose he wants to keep whatever he's confronting me about private.

His hand catches the back of my head by the nape of my hair. His strong fingers fist my long, wild hair. He tilts my

head to the side to expose my neck. His nose grazes up the column of my throat, inhaling and scenting me.

I shiver with need, secretly wishing for him to trail his fingers over the same place, then to dip lower. I want him to tug my dress down and kiss my breasts.

My core pulses from his intense attention and the heat of his body seeping into mine. I want to match his assertive behavior, gripping his silky locks and bringing his luscious mouth to mine. I want to know what Jaden's kiss might be like. Would he excite me just as the prince does? Or would he ignite my passions even more?

After checking my scent, Jaden releases some of whatever strange tension has built up in him, and his hold on me softens. With his gentling grip on my hair, he turns my head to look up at him properly. There's a flicker of relief in his eyes. But why?

I feel no such relief. Quite the opposite, actually.

His dominant touch makes my body blaze with fire. Low in my belly, I instantly feel like the molten metal from a foundry. He smells faintly of smoke, like the coals heating my fire. His touch makes me believe he could melt my flesh and bones.

I would laugh off my body's response if Jaden wasn't acting so fiercely serious. He almost feels feral at the moment. To be honest, so do I.

Our lips are only an inch apart, and I briefly wonder if he might commit the forbidden act of intimacy with a human.

Or is this another one of his self-defense challenges to train me? Am I supposed to break from his hold? If so, I don't want to try.

Stars! Am I in heat? Do humans go into heat? If I am, it could be the reason I'm attracting so much unlikely physical contact from these males.

Then reality crashes over me. He *cannot* be attracted to a mortal.

I make a weak attempt to push him away. “Let me go. The prince is causing himself grief by having me attend this stupid ball.”

“Yes, no doubt he is... for all of us.” Jaden shrugs, still holding me close. “But he wants you there. And the prince gets what he wants. Whether it’s good for him or for anyone else.” His words are loaded. He narrows his violet eyes, piercing my resolve to fight. “Isn’t that right, love?”

I gulp, then steady myself and push on his chest to encourage him to let me down. “I just want to live out my simple and short life in Betonie.”

Jaden doesn’t yield to my nudging, and instead, his violet eyes glow. He looks at me like he might take a bite out of me. “I believe that’s what you *thought* you wanted when you arrived, but you want more now. Don’t you?”

I bristle at his statement. Why the shift in his attitude? What could he possibly think that I could expect out of all this? I know the ridiculousness of even what has happened so far. Besides being a lowly peasant, I am a despised human servant as well.

As I wiggle to break free, his sugary spicy scent fills the air again.

His mouth parts ever so slightly, and I see the words ready on his lips. He’s longing to say more about how I’ve turned greedy. I suppose I am greedy and needy since I dream of a life where all three males are mine. I wish they could see me as a potential mate, even if for a brief moment.

Jaden looks away, softening his hold, and sighs wearily. “You *are* going to your dress fitting,” he says apologetically. “Fight with the prince later if you think it will do any good in changing his mind. But I have my orders.” He releases me.

As I brush off his hold, he smirks at me like *I’m* the dramatic one. I glare at him. “What? You wrinkled my dress before I’m to meet a royal dressmaker!”

Jaden frowns and begins his fast pace again in the direction we had originally been heading.

I rush after him. “Why are you mad at me?”

“What makes you think I’m mad at you?” Jaden asks, his handsome brow crinkles in confusion. His dark hair falls into his face as he turns toward me.

I wave off his question. “Don’t worry, I won’t mention your ire for me to the prince.”

Jaden chuckles to himself. “Tell him whatever you wish.” He shrugs again, but I don’t believe his nonchalance. “I don’t have a problem with you, but I am concerned about the *prince’s* obsession with you.”

“Obsession?” It’s my turn to laugh now. “I’m nothing more than a passing amusement, likely forgotten a moment after I’m sent away. And my novelty will wear off soon. Let’s hope it’s *before* the party.”

“Doubtful.” A grin with a twinkle in his eye breaks through his aloof attitude. “You’re pretty novel.”

I suck back a breath. He’s stunning when he smiles. As a distraction from his disarmingly good looks, I ask, “Is that why you’re so quiet today? You’re worried about his *obsession* becoming a problem?”

“The predominant Elven thought is that humans are dim-witted, unattractive, and violent. But that isn’t the case, and especially not with you. These elves don’t want their preconceived conceptions to be challenged.” Jaden takes a deep breath. “So no, I don’t agree with his blatant flaunting of your presence to irritate the other powers that be, but I completely understand the prince’s fascination and insistent curiosity in... exploring your depths.”

I don’t know how to respond to that statement. Is he saying he is interested in having sex with me, too? Or just that I am *interesting*?

“Has the prince fully explored...” Jaden pauses.

“*My depths*?” I huff, increasing my speed to somehow pull ahead of Jaden’s long Elven strides. “You should ask him.”

“It’s just... I smell *you* on him. And vice versa.”

I stop dead in my tracks and make a face as I feel myself heat with embarrassment. I sniff my arm. “*Really?* What do you mean?” I play innocent.

“Your... *perfume* was clinging to him this morning.” Jaden quickens his pace down the hall, forcing me to catch up.

“Perfume?” It’s then I realize Jaden detects Eldrin had kissed me between my legs. Is it creepy that Jaden knows my *scent*? Do I want him to know my scent?

“Is that why you sniffed me just now? To check what Eldrin did with me?” I ask indignantly. “You could have just talked to me instead of... you know... doing all that weird, intense touching.”

His jaw tenses, but he nods. “True, but my protectiveness overcame me.”

That’s how he demonstrates his protectiveness?

“I don’t intend to harm the prince.” I grump. Then I worry maybe I might harm him accidentally. What if I *am* cursed? What if I already hurt him and we haven’t seen the effects yet? I’ve read that sometimes curses can take a while to manifest.

“That’s not at *all* what I meant.” Jaden shakes his head like I’m missing his point.

I’m about to insist he explain his point when we arrive at the seamstress’s workshop.

I grimace, out of breath from running to keep up with Jaden’s gait. The Elven female glances at both of us and reads the tension, trying to figure out what just happened.

“The human is here for her fitting,” Jaden barks and sits down in an empty overstuffed chair, crossing his arms and turning away.

“Greetings, I’m Wyn, *the human*. Obviously.” I smile without humor and bow.

“I am Pamina,” she says in a curt voice and gestures sharply to a dress on a designing form. “The prince sent down his specific request. Let’s see how the garment fits you.”

The gown is gorgeous. Periwinkle with white flowers embroidered along the bodice with a full flowing skirt. “It’s the most beautiful dress I’ve seen. You created this *last* night?”

Pamina glances at Jaden. A quick non-verbal communication occurs between the two elves.

I sense there is secret here, but I am treading on thin ice with Jaden’s patience and apparently the female’s as well.

He turns his head, dismissing me again.

“I should see what I need to adjust for your... petite frame.”

I frown. Standing at least six inches shorter than the average Elven female, I’m not necessarily petite. I have more curves, full hips, and large breasts. Perhaps that is a factor in Eldrin’s strange attraction to me. I am different, quirky, *peculiar*.

Pamina yanks the dress I’m wearing right over my head with no preamble. I cross my hands over my naked body but realize I’m being ridiculous. Jaden already has glimpsed my naked body during Eldrin’s explorations, and this seamstress hardly cares other than to clothe me.

In my peripheral vision, I notice Jaden covertly observing Pamina as she takes her time getting the new gown onto me. My cheeks flush pink.

Though it seems he’s watching her more than me. Does he find her attractive? Or does he worry she might harm me?

Once the garment is on my body, I’m self-conscious about how my breasts are pushed upward in the tight bodice, like an offering of melons to be eaten. While I don’t mind how Eldrin tasted me last night, I’ll have to stop indulging him in his human fascination. However, this dress might only spur on his already considerable interest in my disgracefully full breasts, in front of other elves, no less.

Maybe the only way to cure Eldrin is to offer my body completely when he comes to visit me tonight. Then I can leave the castle before the party, and he will move on to his

next acquisition. Isn't that all I am to him—a trinket to acquire? Once I give my body to him to do with as he pleases, he'll believe he has fully claimed my forgiveness. He can assume he's a better elf for winning me over, then he will be satisfied with our strange deal. It's what Oakes suggests—that I am only something to procure and then toss aside. Eldrin admits it himself that he's spoiled.

Jaden's comment echoes in my head. *The prince gets what he wants.*

Perhaps giving in to his original offer is what's best. Because I now want to experience sex too. Then we can both get our wish and continue on with our lives—separately. I will be safely back with Merlara, where I won't cause him problems with his kingdom. Oakes and Jaden can relax and protect their prince. They all can go on with their long happy lives, and I will only be a vague, amusing memory.

Pamina places a pair of shoes in front of me. I try them after being told I will wear them with the gown. She marks a couple of adjustments to be made in the length of my skirt.

I shake my head as I stare at myself in the mirror. “It's too much. I look ridiculous in such a gorgeous, expensive dress.” My shoulders slump at the absurdity of my circumstances. The prince is dressing the servant in jewels. “*Is he trying to make a joke of me?*”

“What? He wouldn't do that.” Jaden rushes over to me and holds my hands in his. “You are gorgeous...”

His violet eyes cut through me again. I suck in a breath. Why does he affect me so much?

He quickly adds, “In this beautiful dress that Pamina so skillfully created.”

Oh, so maybe he doesn't want to offend the dress designer.

When the tension between us subsides, Jaden retreats to the edge of the room so Pamina can finish her adjustments.

The entire way back to my chambers, Jaden is disturbingly quiet again.

Just before we reach my room and my voice can reach the door guard's ears, I whisper, "Why were you so upset at the prince? Is it truly because you smelled my perfume on him? Or is there something else I should know?"

Opening my door, Jaden abruptly ushers me inside. An instant after closing the door, he corrals me against the wall.

My heart races, unsure of his aggressive response.

Bracketing his arms on either side of my head, he leans in so close that I could easily kiss him if I dared. "You're asking for your death, staying here with him."

My eyes widen. "Are *you* going to kill me?" I don't sense murderous intentions, but elves are often hard to read.

"No. Not me." Jaden jerks his head back, as if just realizing his dominant position over me. "The king's commander, Turgon, has been asking about you. He is not particularly fond of... well, anyone besides himself. I don't want to see you get hurt. This is all too dangerous for you here. The prince is risking your life so he can—" He looks away.

"Go on, finish your sentence... so he can *use me for entertainment*? I know what he's doing. I'm not as dim-witted as you elves think I am." I narrow my eyes and continue my challenge before he can respond, "Or are you just worried that the prince will be grumpy if his toy gets broken before he's done playing with it?"

"That's not what I am saying," Jaden snaps. "Not at all."

"Why do you care what happens to me?"

His jaw tightens. "How can you say that? Just because you're mortal doesn't mean I don't care. Haven't I made that clear to you by now?"

I search his violet eyes. Maybe he does care about me. "All right." I raise my hands up in surrender, but Jaden is so close, I accidentally skim his gloriously muscled chest.

Just then, Oakes flings the door open and sees Jaden pinning me against the wall with my hands pressed against his chest. At a brief glance at our shocked faces, Oakes can't tell if I have consented to Jaden's apparent advance or not.

Grabbing Jaden, Oakes tosses him off me. I shove myself away from the wall and retreat to the corner.

Are they going to fight? Over me? It makes no sense.

Oakes slams the door shut, turns to Jaden, and says in a deadly calm voice, "*Explain.*"

"It was nothing." Jaden puts his hands out in a gesture to relax Oakes.

"Didn't look that way," Oakes growls. "Get. Out."

Jaden glances at me, apologizing with a look.

"Go," Oakes orders. When Jaden closes the door behind him, Oakes turns his glower at me. "What did he do to you?"

"He warned me to leave." Slightly frightened by his anger, I remain in the corner. "*Intensely.* But nothing happened." When Oakes doesn't respond and continues his furious stance, I shift further into the corner. "What are *you* going to do?"

He blinks, confused. "What?"

"Now, you look like you're going to rip *my* head off."

"Of course not." Oakes softens and relaxes his fists. "Jaden appeared as if he was about to force himself on you."

"Oh, I thought it might seem like we were kissing." I add, "Which we weren't."

"It appeared that way, but I sensed irritation in you."

"You can read my emotions?"

"When I focus and don't behave as a thick-skulled troll."

I venture out from the corner and explain, "Jaden is upset that the prince spent last night *with* me."

"I'm... concerned too. Eldrin puts you in an increasingly precarious situation every time he pushes your *friendship.*" Oakes runs his hands through his thick, brown hair. "The

delegations will begin arriving tomorrow. And there is one, in particular, who will not be pleased with the prince's attachment to you."

"Who?"

"His *betrothed*, Princess Alcina."

CONFRONTATIONS

WYNSTELLE

“*H*is betrothed? I didn’t know he was promised to anyone... and to Princess Alcina, of all elves? From what Merlara said, Ryven has a tentative alliance with her kingdom.” I pace the room. “Oh, no. But... but... why would she be upset with me? The prince has had sex with *thousands* of females, right? Isn’t that what you elves do before you mate for life?”

“Yes. Eldrin has been with many *elves*.” Oakes emphasizes the word *elves*. “I would hardly count them in the thousands. And yes, Alcina has many sexual partners herself.”

“*Oh*, it’s because I’m human.” My shoulders curl in on themselves, and the hot sting of tears burn down my face. “She thinks I’m *contaminating* Eldrin?”

“Come here.” Oakes opens his arms, and I crumple into his embrace.

His massive arms wrapped around me make me feel so tiny and insignificant. Perhaps I can just shrink so small I can disappear.

I need Oakes’ healing right now. Just as I think this, I feel his magic pouring into my body, into my heart. His electric touch is so different from Eldrin’s sensuality or Jaden’s heat. My arms wrap around his waist, and he holds me tighter.

Oakes soothes me with his large hand, cradling my head against his solid chest.

I have a moment of hope. If Oakes dares to be so close, maybe my strange mark isn't a curse.

"Alcina's bias toward humans isn't personal," Oakes explains.

"I never quite fit in Elfhome. And now, my kind is being hunted here." Goddess, I can hear the grief in my own voice. I've lost all hope in ever having a happy life. "Maybe I *should* return to the mortal realm where I belong. Now, before she arrives."

"Don't leave, not yet. Keep your promise to the prince and stay until the ball. *Then* decide where you want to go." Oakes creates a bit of space between us by taking one step back. He gently wipes my tears away. "I won't let any harm come to you. Jaden wants your safety, too. Eldrin can handle Alcina's ire. Just be cautious of your actions in public."

"I have been careful. I haven't asked for any attention. None." I shake my head, wondering what I could do to make this all go away. The only thing that comes to mind is to run. Run hard and fast right now. But there is nowhere to go. I can't even return to the mortal realm on my own, and I'm no longer safe in Elfhome with whoever is behind the ghoul attacks still out there.

"I know you never asked for this. I'll remind Eldrin he needs to pull back his attention on you until the ball is over and our guests are gone."

"But there's already tension between the two kingdoms. Upsetting Alcina might cause a kingdom-sized problem all over something as absurd as Eldrin's odd interest in *exploring* a mortal." I bury my face in Oakes' chest, hiding the embarrassment that I thought I could belong somewhere for even a moment... that I could be someone Eldrin cared about. But I don't belong with these elves.

"Well, um..." Oakes sounds uncomfortable now I've mentioned Eldrin exploring my body. He must think I'm

pathetic on so many levels. Rightfully so, since I should have been brave that first meeting and allowed Eldrin to rut me. I could be with Merlara now if I had.

“You need to keep Eldrin at bay as best as you can.” Oakes strokes my hair, taming its wildness.

“How? The prince... Well, he’s the *prince!*”

“He told me he granted you your freedom.” Oakes raises his eyebrows knowingly.

“I’m beginning to think he *granted* my freedom so that I would offer myself willingly, removing any guilt for *taking* my body under duress.” I huff. “Besides, he only freed me with the caveat that I stay for the ball. I stupidly promised him I would attend.”

Oakes slowly releases me and retreats to the chair by the table, refusing to look me in the eye. “Did you offer yourself last night?”

“Um, not exactly. Not completely.” My skin flushes warm, thinking of the release Eldrin gave me.

“Do you *want* to share your body with him?” Oakes picks at the platter of fruits on the table.

“I have enjoyed what we have experienced so far. Maybe I should just let Eldrin take me whatever way he wants, get it over with, and then he won’t make me stay any longer.” I wring my hands. “But what if that’s the wrong decision? And why, in all that’s sacred, is this on *my* shoulders?”

“Because Eldrin can’t bring himself to turn away from you. He’s not strong enough to resist temptation.”

“Why not?” I don’t understand his obsession and shake my head in confusion. “If I offer my body to him, he will probably let me go home. But what if he suffers because of his intimate involvement with me?”

“It’s more likely that you will suffer for his actions.” Oakes grits his teeth. “Your future is at risk more than his. His dalliances will be dismissed, even for one such as this, eventually. *You* will not fare so well.”

“Why? I’m human. My name is already worthless.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but if there are political repercussions, the prince will outlive them. You probably will not. And as horrible as it is, they will blame you for tempting him.”

I balk. “*Tempting* him? With what? My short legs and pasty skin?”

Oakes’ forehead furrows. “Is that how you see yourself?”

“Uh, why yes, of course. How can I not, living amongst you?” I throw my hands in the air, gesturing at my entire person. “I’m not some gorgeous, magnetic elf who radiates sex, grace, and magic. I really don’t get why the prince wants to roll in the dirt with me at all. Is it just to be salacious?”

Oakes rushes across the room and holds my face in his powerful hands. I gasp and stupidly and briefly believe that he might kiss me. But no, his passion must be about the threat we all face.

Why are Eldrin’s advisors so very riled up over my intimacy with the prince? Perhaps the danger is far greater than even they are letting on.

Now I wonder if that is what the mage told them in private.

Maybe the prince will recover from this controversy, but maybe Jaden and Oakes will take the blame for this situation. It can’t be that royal elves truly care about a mortal servant’s well-being. Can it?

Oakes gazes into my eyes. “Just because you are human doesn’t make you any less magical or attractive. On the contrary, you have a power uniquely your own. So do not underestimate your value.” His thumb brushes over my cheek where my scars used to be. His attention drops to my parted mouth.

I snap my mouth closed, feeling a fool for wishing to kiss Oakes. I’m a mess. My body is so confused, believing these gorgeous males could be my matches. It’s forbidden.

However, the desire has stirred within me now after meeting them and makes me crave a mate. I suppose I should insist on returning to the mortal realm so I can find someone to share this passion. But I also fear no one will satisfy my cravings like any of these males could.

I study Oakes' face, looking for clues to his motivations in saying such sweet things to me. Why does he need to be so close, clutching my face while he tells me this?

I open my mouth, ready to ask, but he flees the room before I can.



Left alone again to drive myself insane, I pace my room for what feels like an eternity. Round and round I go, debating my limited options. Do I offer myself completely to Eldrin tonight? Or is it for his own good, and probably mine, to keep him away? I was kidding myself last night, thinking I could enjoy his body in the way a mate does. Should I break my promise to attend the ball and run away at this very moment?

But the news today put it all in a different light. Eldrin has a promised mate. One who will probably have me killed because I dared to touch what is hers to claim.

Then there are the implications outside of my worthless life. What if the fragile alliance with Alcina's kingdom falls apart because of my indiscretion? My poor choices shouldn't be the reason thousands suffer.

Eldrin gave me the power to say no to him. Maybe he gave me that power so that I *will* say no, forcing him to behave when he doesn't trust himself to stay away. He isn't used to establishing boundaries or limits. Oakes suggested as much about the prince.

A knock on the door jars me out of my reverie. Eldrin slips inside the room before I can ask who it is.

Thankfully, Eldrin sits at the table instead of approaching me. "How was your day?"

Using the table as a barrier, I sit down on the other side. “I had my dress fitting. It is an absolutely lovely gown, but it’s far too much for me to wear to the ball.”

“I can have Pamina remove some fabric,” he says with a wink.

“You know what I mean. It’s too extravagant,” I protest, trying my best to convince him his entire plan is folly. “The party attendees will think—”

“Think that I like you?” Eldrin interrupts. “That I enjoy your company? I do.”

“But—”

He grinds his teeth and closes his eyes in irritation. “You’ve been talking to Jaden and Oakes about this, haven’t you?”

“Well, yes. They do have a point about the dangers of this deal between us. You don’t need the problems I will cause just by me being here. I’m a liability, not an asset to your kingdom as a diplomat for humankind.” I clench my fists in my lap, and steel myself against his powerful will. “I’m not going to the party. I’m leaving before your *betrothed*, Alcina, arrives tomorrow.”

Stars and stones, why does my heart feel as if it’s cracking? Is this jealousy and loss destroying my heart? Unfortunately, I believe it is. I’m in more trouble than I realized. I’ll never recover from this experience.

Eldrin’s eyes flash with hurt, then with indignation. “No, you’re not leaving.”

“Didn’t you grant me the freedom to leave?”

“Perhaps you’ve forgotten that I also granted your freedom with your promise to attend the ball,” he snaps.

I rub my face in frustration. “Why are you so stubborn? What reason could you have to demand I remain here? Why do you demand that I attend a ball where I’ll be a joke, or worse, a target?”

His entire body tenses, but he doesn't answer my question. "Why are *you* so stubborn? I only requested you to attend a party. I didn't demand you..." He stops himself from continuing.

"Please, continue..." I insist, then wait for just a quick moment before going on. "Were you going to say that you didn't *demand* that I have sex with you?" I fold my arms over my chest, wishing this was all over or I had never left Merlara's.

Eldrin breathes heavily as if he is holding back a crumbling wall of frustration.

When he doesn't respond to me, I ask, "Will us having sex make you end this game of yours so I can go home? Fine. *Take* my body. Get whatever vulgar, forbidden act you wish out of your system with a *cursed* human, so you can focus on your future *Elven* mate."

Jumping up to my feet, I pull on my bodice's lacing to undress.

Eldrin jumps out of his chair, rushes around the table, and captures my hands, stilling them with his strong grip. "Wyn, stop this. What exactly are you accusing me of?" He looks more saddened than angry now.

"That I'm just your latest toy." My tears threaten to fall. I've done exactly as Oakes warned me not to do. I've become attached to Eldrin. "It isn't nice to have me attend the ball, so you can use me in some kind of cruel jealousy game with your betrothed. Or manipulate the other kingdoms, or whatever the feck this is about." I pull on his hold, ready to run. Wanting to run. Expecting to have to run for my life. I have been *brutally honest*. And I don't know if the prince can handle someone telling him off.

"I don't think you're a toy." He leans in and growls.

I flinch, worried I've pushed him too far.

When he sees my frightened reaction, he says, "I would never hurt you."

“Please. Let me go.” I nod to the door, wondering if he will allow it.

He softens his voice and steps closer, stroking my hair. His stormy gaze pierces me. “I don’t want to take Alcina as a mate. I never did. That contract was forced upon me. And to be clear, I’m not using you to upset her or any other leader. It’s the opposite. I want elves to have a more favorable stance toward humans. I hope when the other leaders meet you, they will rethink their attitude about human relations.”

“Is that what you call what you did last night, *human relations*?”

“Well, yes, for humans to be free,” Eldrin says, “But I meant more than sexual acts. I want you to feel welcomed in our realm, to end the idea that our kind are so different.”

He finally releases my hands, and I relax my arms to my sides. Does he truly want me to be the mortal representative for positive human relations? I am only a young, simple servant.

“Please reconsider leaving before the ball. My intentions are pure concerning your attendance.” Eldrin kisses my forehead. “And I’m not ready to lose my... companion.” Swiftly, he leaves my room.

Companion?

This word makes it sound like I am more than a conquest or a toy. My head spins with new questions.

SEQUESTERED

WYNSTELLE

*I*n the morning, Jaden arrives at my door with a food platter and a chagrined smile.

“Why aren’t you taking me to Eldrin’s dining hall?” I ask, opening the door wide to allow him into my room.

Rubbing his neck, he frowns. “I was ordered to bring your breakfast to you.”

“Oh, I see.” I shut the door behind him, and Jaden places the generous food offering on my small table. “So, I’m being punished.”

“What? No, the prince and Oakes had to meet with the arriving delegations this morning.” Jaden eyes me apprehensively as he sits down to join me for breakfast. “I thought you would be irritated with me for my rough warning.”

“No. You were right to insist I leave.” I wave off his concern. His assertive style of explaining things is the least of my problems.

“Do you feel comfortable telling me why Eldrin would be upset with you?”

Odd. Eldrin didn’t inform his advisor of our fight. Or my wish to leave. Maybe he doesn’t believe my claim.

“I told him last night that I’m leaving *before* the ball.” I mumble, “And I might have added in some other choice words and accusations.”

With a heavy exhale, Jaden sits back in his chair and studies me. “Was it Oakes who convinced you to leave now?”

“Oakes explained the risks to the realm and about Eldrin’s betrothed, *Princess Alcina*.” I shrug, attempting to make it not hurt so badly. Perhaps I can convince myself that leaving these males behind means nothing to me. “I don’t really belong in Elfhome, let alone in this castle. I definitely don’t belong in the prince’s bed. Jaden, I have to get out of here. Soon.”

Picking at a piece of bread, he asks, “How did Eldrin take the news?”

“He said he plans for me to champion human relations in this realm.”

Jaden chuckles. “Is that what he’s calling what he does in your bed?”

“That’s what I said.” I smile despite the pain. The absurdity of it all is getting to me. “It’s ridiculous. *I* can’t help change the minds of the Elven kingdoms about human policies.” I drop my face into my hands in exhaustion. “Especially when they are all upset that he is sharing my bed.”

“Actually, he might have had a point about you being a positive influence, but he goes about things carelessly, not thinking things through. You’re correct. He shouldn’t have taken you as a lover and *then* try to claim you as an ambassador.”

“I need to leave Ryven and go back to where I belong—the mortal realm. It will be better for everyone. The ghouls attacks are likely just the beginning of the threats against my life. I’m not safe in Elfhome anymore. Besides, I will only cause you all more problems.”

Jaden leans forward, attentive. “Did you tell Eldrin that you wanted to return to the mortal realm?”

I stare at Jaden. Why is he so interested in the answer? I shake my head. “No. I didn’t confess my decision to risk

returning to the human world. I realized that was what I needed to do after he left.”

Jaden quickly doles out the food platter and sets out a plate in front of both of us. “When were you thinking of leaving?” he asked, his voice soft.

Despondently, I pick at my plate. “Now. After we have finished speaking.”

Jaden tilts his head, watching and reading me. “But you don’t *want* to go.”

“I did when I first arrived.” I sigh. “But yes, you can see through me. I wanted a bit more and thought I could have a moment of pleasure before I returned to Betonie. I’ve enjoyed my alone time with the prince, and I suppose I allowed myself to dream I could truly belong. It hurts to even think about leaving you.” By his strange expression, I must have caught Jaden off-guard with my sentiment.

Jaden touches my hand. “I’m sorry I was... *harsh* yesterday.”

“You don’t have to explain.” I pull my hand back. The contact is too much to process. His energy is overwhelming. If he gives me more affection, I might not find the will to leave. “Things will be put right for you all soon. I won’t be an issue after we finish this meal.”

“Are you planning on saying farewell to the prince?”

“So he can try to talk me out of it? Or stop me by locking me in this room?” Oh, Goddess. What if he does that?

I jump up and grab my pack, checking my things are inside. I gather a couple pieces of fruit, bread, and cheese on my cloth napkin, then wrap it all up, placing the rest of my breakfast in my bag. Moving behind the room partition, I remove my new clothes for the dress Merlara gave me for my court appearance.

“If you are going back to the mortal realm, I’m escorting you. You’ll need a royal elf or Elven guard to locate and open the portals anyway,” Jaden says over the thin screen. “Besides, I’d never forgive myself if you get hurt on the road.”

Adjusting my skirt as I emerge from behind the partition, I almost bump into him. I am surprised Jaden has moved across the room and is so close. I'm reminded that dangers can easily sneak up on me with my limited human senses. I think about the ghouls attacking living humans and shudder.

"Well, there are threats on the road, and I can't carry a blade to protect myself." I pause, thinking it through. "But the prince will punish you if you help me. I can't stand to be the cause. Perhaps you trust one of your guards to help me?"

"I'll deal with Eldrin's wrath. I have before," Jaden says. "We'll depart this evening when the delegates are at their gathering."

"Why not now?" I sling my pack onto my shoulder, signaling I'd rather run while I have the nerve.

Jaden braces my shoulders. "The delegates are arriving as we speak. There's too much activity at the entrances. I have already promised the prince that I would keep you safe in your room for the *day*. Then I can fulfill my word to the letter of it." Slowly, he slips the pack from my shoulder. "If we wait until he's busy with the informal evening reception in the throne room, we can leave without his notice."

I nod my consent. It's a good plan to leave when everyone is occupied.

"How far is the closest portal?" I ask.

He cocks a brow and finally answers. "Most are at least a day's ride away."

"That's too far for you to leave your post. I can't ask you to do this." I toss my pack on the table. "What if you don't make it back on time for the ball?"

"The party? Oh no, that's fine. I don't like those events." Jaden waves me off like I am a madwoman. "That's more of Oakes' and the prince's forte. Eldrin will have to deal with only Oakes and my well-trained guards for his security." His warm, large hands cup my shoulder. "Whatever grief Eldrin gives me, it will be worth it. I couldn't stand the thought of

you getting hurt because I was making small talk with some twit.”

I chuckle. “I don’t make any better company.”

“Untrue.” Jaden frowns at my self-deprecating comment. “Besides, I’d rather fight ghouls than dance.”



I pass the rest of the day reading about the mortal realm, an Elven historian’s version of it, at least. Jaden and Oakes made it sound like humans aren’t all bad. It gives me hope as I realize I will be a full-fledged human soon. I vaguely wonder if the fae magic that kept me alive as a baby might not extend back to the mortal realm. If Eldrin, Jaden, or Oakes had heard of that happening, they probably would have warned me of that. Unless that was how they secretly planned to eventually be rid of me.

I shake the negative thoughts from my head. I don’t truly believe they would be that cruel. They might not be completely upfront with me. With my whole situation up in the air, ready to crash down around me, I suppose I am on high alert for all dangers.

If the magic doesn’t hold, then I will have to be thankful that I even was allowed these last twenty years.

Jaden doesn’t leave me alone in my room for a moment, remaining here to go through his security reports at my table instead of his office.

Is Jaden here to protect me? Or is he here to make sure that I don’t run off? Will he actually help me return to the humans or try to convince me to stay at the last minute?

I shiver with uncertainty. I don’t want to go back to the mortal realm, but if I stay in Elfame, then Eldrin will continue to pursue me, and my welcome amongst the fae has worn out.

From across the room, I watch Jaden, wondering if he ever felt the same attraction as I did. My back itches, reminding me

why I shouldn't allow Eldrin near me again. Someone might have secretly placed the mark to harm the prince. If I am cursed, which I likely am, then I'm putting Eldrin, Oakes, and Jaden in harm's way. Perhaps I put the entire realm in danger just by speaking to Eldrin and upsetting Ryven's diplomatic ties.

There's a knock on the door.

Jaden lifts his hand to suggest I should stay where I am at my window seat.

He opens the door to find a guard checking in with him.

The stoic elf stares at me as he enters my room. "Master Jaden, everything seems to be proceeding smoothly. Prince Eldrin has approved your request to forego the ceremonies this evening."

"Thank you." Jaden gives the guard a curt nod. "I want constant patrols for Prince Eldrin's keep. We don't want him to suffer any incidents. There are a lot of unknown faces inside our walls this week."

"Indeed," the guard says with a hint of a sneer and shoots his gaze at me. He bows and watches me intently as he leaves.

I'd thought his subtly hostile behavior had gone unnoticed by Jaden, until he says, "He's a bit of a troll, but a loyal troll."

"He probably doesn't think I'm a good influence on the prince." I duck my head with regret. "Goddess, I'm really not wanted here."

"That isn't entirely accurate. If it weren't for all the antagonistic eyes on the prince, all three of us would love to have you here indefinitely." Jaden narrows his gaze on me, studying me. "Are you sure you don't want to go back to Merlara instead of the mortal realm?" He sits down next to me in the window seat and stretches out.

I smile, but get up to go rest on my bed, propped up against the headboard and a book on my lap.

"I don't think returning to Merlara is a good idea anymore." Sorrow fills my voice. I never wanted any of this.

“Because of the ire of the elves?” Jaden asks.

“And because of Eldrin. He might not leave me alone if I remain in his lands.” I sigh. “But this is bigger than just the prince. The ghouls’ enchantment is certainly a deterrent to staying. Besides, maybe the humans aren’t as bad as Merlara made them out to be.” I pick at my fingers, wishing I knew more about my origins. “I don’t feel like a horrible creature, and not because I was raised here. Oakes said he was fond of some of them.”

“You are right. I thought some were fine folk.” Jaden tilts his head in contemplation. “Although they will be suspicious of outsiders. You won’t easily blend in, not right away.”

“Will they be hostile?” I ask, intrigued at the firsthand wisdom.

“I suppose some have violent tendencies, but I have met fae who are more violent.” His gaze grows intense. “I sense you’d rather return to Merlara instead of the mortal realm. But why? You were only a servant.”

“Merlara is a kind keeper.” I say, “Although I would have asked for more freedom if I went back—perhaps more time to read and relax. But I will have to risk everything and see where I end up with the humans. It will probably be another role as a servant. Which is fine, I’m not fussy. I can work hard.”

“Don’t you desire something better for yourself?” he asks, as if I have a plethora of choices.

“What are my options?” I trace my finger across the elaborate bedspread pattern. “I must try to find my way among humans. Though I can’t use my skills because, from what I have read, women aren’t accepted as bladesmiths—only as a wife to one. If I had a bit more education, I could be a tutor for well-to-do children. I wish I knew who my parents were and I could seek them out. Goddess, perhaps they are even still alive, but I will never know. If I had a name, then maybe my parents’ village might aid me, taking pity on an orphan.”

“Roul never gave you any details about finding you?” Jaden asks, sounding shocked by this bit. “Not even the name of a nearby village?”

“No.” I drop my head back to the headboard, feeling hopeless. “I don’t remember Roul. He died when I was an infant, not long after he brought me to Merlara. I asked her about it when I was older, but she doesn’t recall any details.”

“Maybe we could ask Mage Neven?” Jaden suggests.

“No. I won’t bother someone of her status with my problems.” I roll my eyes. I was lucky to have her give me the time of day when we met. “If she knew, don’t you think she would have offered that information when she was reading me?”

“Mages are strange. So no, I don’t assume anything about them.”

“Jaden, I appreciate your concern. But I can’t stay in this castle any longer, or even in Elfame, not with Eldrin upsetting everyone with his ridiculous interest in me.”

I hate that this is the end of my story with these wonderful elves. My emotions swirl, feeling so lost and alone.

“Wyn, I’m sorry.” Jaden runs over and crawls up next to me. He pulls me into his arms. His heat washes over my body. Why does he feel so sublime? He’s like the dawning of the sun after a cold night. “I wish there was another way for you.”

I settle into him, basking in the comfort of his powerful arms. This is probably the last time I will have this comfort in my life. “At least I had a purpose when I helped Merlara. Now... I don’t know what will become of me. Will I find another reason to wake up in the morning?”

“You deserve more than a lonely life of labor.” Jaden strokes my back as I curl into him.

I rein in my chaotic emotions. I finally break down with Jaden. “You thought I was brave. But I don’t feel very brave at the moment.”

“You are. Braver than I am.” Jaden’s arms seem to block out the world. I stare up at his kind, gorgeous face, filled with concern and the flames of passion. He squeezes my body closer to his. The warmth from his hands radiates through my dress and into my low back.

I try to prevent it, but my body responds to his. My core heats, and I clench my thighs together.

I try to shift away, but Jaden resists giving me my space.

Even though I wish I could stay wrapped up in his embrace forever, I warn, “The prince would be angry if he came in right now.”

“First, I am only comforting you. Second, Eldrin has no claim on you. Not anymore. You are free. And you are free to stay in Elfhome.”

“I suppose he gave up his claim.” I relax in Jaden’s arms and press my head against his chest. I know it’s wrong to want him as much as I do.

I don’t even want to leave his hugs behind. In his tight embrace, I get the impression he doesn’t want to let me go, either.

“But just because he released me from his contract doesn’t mean I am free to go anywhere I want. Or do anything I please. I am human, a second-class citizen here, and I need Merlara as my Elven keeper to exist in this land.”

“It might appease the nobles to know you weren’t *Eldrin’s* special guest anymore,” Jaden says. “A prince cannot keep you for himself without repercussions, but the king and the royal courts wouldn’t say anything if I were to claim you—”

“What? Are you insane?” I jump out of bed and stare at him. “I go from being the prince’s possession to being yours?” The idea that Jaden only wants me to be his servant, as an amusement, smashes away at my heart. “So you’d keep me around for the prince until he gets bored. Then what? I don’t want to be *passed around* to all the elves in the castle as some sort of entertainment. I *am* a person. With feelings.”

“*What?*” Jaden bolts from the bed and chases me across the room. He catches my chin, trying to make me look into his eyes. “Please, that’s not what I meant. I would never treat you as a *possession*. I would never share you. I thought... I only wished... to offer you a better life than you had. Or a happier one than you might find among humans. I thought you enjoyed my company.”

Why would he ask to be my keeper? It’s as I suspected—I’m just a possession to claim. Or am I the victim of a sick Elven game? “Please. Leave me alone.” I fold my arms across my chest.

Jaden glances at the window and my eyes follow his. Evening has arrived.

“I’ll give you a few moments to realize that I only have the best of intentions. I’m leaving just long enough to grab my traveling gear. You need to ready yourself, too.” His body vibrates with his frustration at being caught in his ploy to become my new owner. “Then we will go wherever you want to go. But do *not* leave without me, even if you are upset because you’ve misunderstood my intentions. It’s not safe out there for any human.” He waits at the door for my answer, then asks with a commanding voice, “*Promise?*”

When I don’t respond, Jaden crosses the room again. He wraps one arm around my waist. His other hand tilts my head up so that I have to look into his violet-colored eyes. “If you agreed to be mine, I would never give you up. *Never*. And it would be you who owns me.” His thumb traces my lower lip as he gazes into my soul.

I gulp and nod slowly. “I’ll wait.”

He presses his lips to my forehead in a chaste kiss and rushes away.

With the closing of the door, I have a pang of regret for my knee-jerk reaction to his offer to be my keeper. Does he really want me, maybe for more than as a servant? But that seems so absurd. Besides, the way I feel about him, my attraction, will only make things difficult between us. He can never commit to me as a true mate does. Then my heart will break when I stay

by his side, growing old and watching as he eventually finds the love of his life.

His words echo back to me: *We will go wherever you want to go. It would be you who owns me.*

Could he really care? Does he have romantic feelings for me?

Is he asking me to run away with him and hide away together? Would I consider it, even if society doesn't allow our kind to mate?

Too soon, the reality that I'm meant to be alone hits me again. Eldrin, Oakes, and Jaden can't be mine, no matter how much I crave them.

CROSSING

WYNSTELLE

*A*fter Jaden leaves to gather his things, I head into my private washroom and splash water on my overheated face. I hear the door to my room open and close, and assume Jaden has returned to explain himself further.

Frustrated because I want more time alone to consider his offer to be my keeper, and that I have no lock or privacy, I storm out of my en suite bathing room to tell him just that.

Instead of the raven-hair Jaden, I discover a stranger—an unfamiliar Elven male. His dark, menacing eyes dart to me as I enter my bedchamber. Despite wearing a castle guard's uniform, I don't believe he's here for my protection.

There's not one drop of kindness in his eyes.

This intruder is a predator, and I am his prey. Of this, I have no doubt.

Fear trembles down my spine. At this very moment, I understand the stories of the Elven hunters and how their quarry often simply surrenders at the sight of them.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, knowing I won't like the answer.

The elf crosses the room in a flash. His vise-like hands grip my throat and slam me against the wall. Instantly, my vision spins and blurs with the violent impact.

“Make a sound, and I will cut you down right now. Grab your things.”

All I can think about is the loss of my elves. Once this rogue guard drags me away, I know I will never see them again. This male will probably kill me after he takes me wherever he wishes to leave my corpse.

A tear cascades down my cheek, knowing that I want Eldrin, Jaden, and Oakes—despite the taboo and the fact I can only ever have them for a few pleasurable secret nights, hidden away in a bedroom.

The male squeezes my throat tighter, and then, with a shove, releases me.

I tumble toward the table, knocking over the food bowl.

I palm the paring knife. With a quick slice, I bleed a trickle of blood.

While I make a scene about getting my pack together, I smear a bit of blood onto the table. I need to let Jaden know I haven't broken my promise to him and didn't leave of my own free will. Although, does it matter? Will he care? Maybe it's better if I'm ripped away without a trace before I make more of a mess of all their lives.

I slide the knife into my pocket, knowing there is little hope of overpowering this male with it.

The elf grabs my upper arm and drags me out of the room.

I scan the halls to see if anyone is around, but not a single elf is here to witness my abduction. Not even my usual door guard, Corwin. That is strange. Maybe he left so this could happen?

“If you cry out, you will die where you stand. Then I will kill anyone you ever cared about. Your Elven keeper, Merlara? I'll slowly slice her to pieces with her own swords. But if you behave, you might survive this.” The male roughly tows me down the hallway.

As he does, I covertly smear my bloody hand along the wall.

My abductor turns and travels down the servant's passageway.

Again, I find it odd that no one is around as a witness. Every other time I have walked these halls, I usually pass a dozen guards or servants. I'm guessing the servants are all attending to the arriving guests. But there should still be guards.

Didn't Jaden ask for extra patrols?

Goddess, I hope no one has been hurt in the process of whisking me away unseen.

Within the tighter servant corridors, the male yanks me closer when I lag behind, preventing me from leaving my bloody trail.

Once in the garden, I glance back to the prince's wing of the castle. If anyone were looking out of a window, they would see me. Has Jaden discovered I'm missing yet? Or is he still collecting his things and giving me space to calm down?

If he doesn't see me being dragged away, Jaden will probably assume that I ran off on my own accord. Will he even notice my blood? Will he know it's a plea for help?

I don't like my odds of survival if this elf manages to get me off the castle grounds.

At the edge of Eldrin's garden, my abductor is distracted by an odd noise in the bushes. It sounds like a high-pitched buzzing within the rustling of the leaves. Is it one of the flower faeries trying to help me?

I use the moment to break the elf's hold.

I manage a few steps before the male's entire hand wraps around my neck and yanks me backward. "Behave, and I'll let you live."

I doubt he will, so I decide to fight. I spin, but it doesn't break his vice-like grip on me. My nails rake at my abductor's face, drawing blood.

I scream as loud as his stranglehold allows, hoping someone will hear. But it only comes out as a muffled croak.

Isn't the castle on high alert because of the prominent guests?

Where *is* everyone?

The male crashes his angry fist down onto my head and throws me over his shoulder as I lose consciousness.



When I come to, twilight is giving over to night.

I hang upside down over my abductor's shoulder, barely regaining my wits.

He tosses me to the cold ground and I flop flat like a rag doll.

With a quick glance side to side, I take in my isolated surroundings, deep in a forest. Well, this is when I die. At least I got to experience a few moments of pleasure before I move beyond the veil.

Dizzy and with an aching bump on my head, I don't attempt to stand. If he wants to kill me, he'll have to work a bit for it.

With a low chant and swipe of the elf's hand, a portal opens before my eyes. A strange circular doorway reveals another scene entirely, covered in snow that glows in the moonlight. Another dimension.

I gasp. Instinctively, I know the winter scene in front of me is in the mortal realm.

He grabs a chunk of my untamed hair and hauls me through to the other side. What the feck is going on?

I shiver with the severe chill in the air and wish I had my cloak.

Releasing me on the other side, he wickedly grins down at me. "Your playtime is over, piglet."

Longing for one more precious moment with my elves, I look back through the portal toward Elfhome, expecting never

to return. “Are you going to kill me?”

“I’m just getting rid of the filth. I’m sure you’ll die all on your own out here in the cold. Don’t dare return to Elfhome. If they try to drag you back, you *will* die for certain next time. And not just you. I will torture and kill anyone you ever cared about.”

His uniform suggests he is a Ryven castle guard, but I wonder if he is actually Alcina’s soldier. If he is, it makes sense. I thrust out my chin in defiance. “You didn’t need to abduct and threaten me. I was leaving the castle tonight, anyway.”

“Don’t lie, you pathetic whore.” He steps toward me and pulls his arm back to hit me. “I should knock your dim-witted brain from your skull.”

I draw my paring knife from my skirt and point it at him to keep him at bay.

He swings to knock it out of my hand.

With unexpected skill, I surprise him by spinning it in my palm. Then, quick as an elf, I slice his arm.

Yet, my victory is fleeting. With his Elven fast reflexes, he reaches out and crushes my wrist.

As my hand releases the knife, he grabs it and angrily tosses it over his shoulder. The knife lands on the fae side of the portal.

“I warned you to behave. I should kill you after all.”

I become completely still. “You will suffer from a deadly curse if you kill me.”

He stops and glares at me. “*What?*”

“I’m cursed.”

The elf stares at me blankly.

“I told you! I was leaving... The prince discovered my cursed nature.” My voice is calm and commanding, hoping to trick him into walking away. “On my back, I have a mark.”

He pauses, questioning my sincerity. Then he rips my dress, exposing my upper body. For a moment, he doesn't see the almost invisible mark by the pale moonlight, but then he jerks away. "*Fucking cursed.*"

"Yes! I am!"

In frustration, he pulls out his dagger and slices me deep across my thigh. "Well, let's see how long you last on your own."

I gasp at the fiery sting.

Then my abductor tosses the dagger into the snow just out of my reach. After he steps back through and returns to Elfhome, he closes the portal behind him.

Now I am alone, freezing in the cold and bleeding out.

No one will come for me. No one knows I need help—not yet. Not before it will be too late.

I crawl to the dagger, which has Eldrin's personal crest. I realize the male has stolen Prince Eldrin's property to make it appear that I'm guilty of theft of royal property, illegal possession of a blade, a royal's blade, *and* of running away unescorted.

Naturally, Eldrin, Oakes, and Jaden will think the worst of me. And if I am found and caught, they will be forced to punish me for these crimes.

I contemplate tossing the blade aside, but if I survive, I will need something to protect myself in this unknown land. I am vulnerable.

My head swims with all that has just happened.

I look under my skirt. The cut on my thigh is deep, but doesn't bleed as fast as it might have. He didn't hit a major blood channel. Pressing on the wound, I rummage through my pack, which, thankfully, the male has left with me. I cut off a strip of my old skirt with the knife. Tying the rag around my leg wound, the bleeding slows, but I still worry about continued blood loss.

I need help. An Elven healer like Oakes could close the wound swiftly. But do mortals have healers like him? There is so much I don't know or understand.

Pushing myself off the ground, I stagger, but remain mostly upright. In the distant dark sky, a hint of smoke etches the moonlit sky.

Fires often mean people.

I head in that direction, but a mile later, the blood loss and the cold drains my resolve and the last of my strength. Finally, tired and knowing I can't last much longer, I collapse onto the ground.

I scoff at my situation and think to myself, *a short mortal life made even shorter.*

Why didn't I attempt to leave the castle before now?

No, I lingered. What a fool I was to think that a mortal could ever be accepted in Elfhome.

Now, I will die alone in the mortal realm's woods without ever meeting another human. Maybe it's better this way.

All I have to do now is close my eyes and pass on to the spirit realm.

But as I do, I dream of another life where the elves and I could be happy together, gifting each other with laughter, love, and pleasure.

RALLIED

JADEN

*T*oss my belongings into my travel pack, and let out a grunt with each item I add. Eldrin will be downright livid when he finds out that Wyn has left him. Add to that, his trusted advisor betrayed him and assisted her. Yes, our actions will send him spiraling.

But the punishment I will receive from Eldrin doesn't matter. I can't let anything happen to my lovely mate, even if she never wants me like that.

The mage said to keep Wynstelle safe at all costs and that the consequences will be devastating if I fail. The wise one asked us if we sensed how important she is.

However, Mage Neven already knew when she asked this question that I would do everything to keep Wyn safe. Besides, it being my job to protect the prince and his subjects, I have my own desire to keep her safe.

But is there something more to the Seer's warning? Something personal?

Was the mage trying to convey to Oakes and me that Wyn is important to *us*? Both of us? Could she also be Oakes' mate match? Does the mage's cryptic words confirm this?

I curse when I reflect on my last conversation with Wyn. My heart aches that she thinks I only wanted to claim her for some sort of sport or entertainment.

Why would she assume that about me? Haven't I shown her how much I care? Perhaps I should have done more to express my affection.

Can't Wyn discern I want to be her true mate?

No. Wynstelle probably can't wrap her mind around that idea. She thinks of herself as a second-class citizen—a servant—and she isn't necessarily wrong according to Elven society. But haven't I made it clear I don't see her that way?

Apparently, I've failed.

Or have I misread all the signs, and she isn't attracted to me in the same way?

Maybe she will never want me after having Eldrin. I hadn't wanted to bring up the idea of being her mate. I didn't want her to feel pressured into mating before she was ready to accept me. But I was afraid she'd leave without knowing I wanted her. I should have waited until we were on the road, but I was hoping she'd accept me and we could make Eldrin see our matebond was the best for Wyn. Besides, didn't he owe it to me to allow me my chance at happiness?

I buckle my sword belt and pick out a sword. Then I snatch up Wyn's dagger from the wall to give back to her. She's owed that much. It's her only true possession.

Taking a quick look around my suite, I decide I will take her to the furthest portal I know about so that I can take my time to convince her to stay with me. Then I'll bring her back here to be my mate.

But will Eldrin let go of his interest in Wynstelle? Oakes might convince the prince to focus on his royal duties.

Walking back to Wyn's room, I notice the patrols seem lighter than usual. But I'm not as concerned as I usually would be about my guards' lack of follow through.

Wyn is a powerful distraction, and all I can think about is the rejection I received when I asked to be her mate. Did she misunderstand my offer?

I should have asked her why she doesn't want me, but I know why. Wynstelle is in love with the prince.

Eldrin is inexplicably charming and powerful. Sure, she might be somewhat attracted to me, but that doesn't mean it is love that she feels.

I grumble. Wyn *is* more interested in Eldrin. She has chosen to be intimate with the prince. I don't believe she takes the act lightly. She pulled away from me after our training—after I had touched her. She must have felt it was wrong, given how she feels for Eldrin.

I turn the corner to Wyn's hallway and pause.

There's no guard posted outside her chamber. My whole body goes on alert.

I hear someone walking behind me and I turn. It's the patrol guard from earlier.

I ask him, "Where is the guard for Wynstelle's room?"

"I don't know. Corwin was here last time I passed through." The patrol glances over at the door. From my angle, I notice it's cracked open. "What is going on?"

I crash through the door.

No one is inside.

I charge into Wyn's adjoining bathing room. She isn't there.

The patrol guard trails in behind me and looks around the empty room. "Do you wish for me to notify the prince?"

"No," I say too quickly. "We don't know where she is. She might be back in a moment. No need to concern the prince when he should stay focused on the delegation."

"Very well." The patrol guard asks, "Should I keep an eye out for her?"

"Yes, tell anyone else you meet to send word to me if they come across Wynstelle. And where are the rest of the patrols?"

"I don't know. I relayed your message to the other guards."

“Oh, and find Corwin. I demand he explain himself.”

The guard bows and continues his route, but at a faster pace.

“Where are you, Wynstelle?” I ask the painfully empty room.

I check for her things. Wyn’s pack is gone. She’s left.

My whole body and all my senses feel as if they’re shutting down—as if I’m dying.

Why did she leave without me? She promised to stay. And I believe she is a woman of her word.

Did she leave on her own accord? Could she really be that upset with me to put herself in danger, traveling alone?

There is no way I can live with myself if she’s hurt. I have to convince her how I feel about her. Even if she chooses Eldrin over me, I will keep her close to him if that’s what she wishes. If she needs Oakes instead, and he wants her, then I will step back and support their relationship.

But I must have her in my life. To have anything less will feel like someone has stolen the air from my lungs.

“I will find you, my love,” I promise. “And help you in whatever way I can.”

TO BE CONTINUED...

in [Tangled Secrets](#)

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I find myself imprisoned with four gorgeous males
from a violent warrior species.

With their massive size, horns, and tails, I worry they will seek
revenge for my reluctant part in their torment.

When my healing hands wander, their growls turn to purrs.

Will they take me with them if we can escape?

Will they give me what I crave—their touch?

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The Egyptian gods were aliens, and their people still exist...

I'm done with Earth. The moon base has to be better.

Famous last words...

However, my plan didn't go as I had hoped.

I end up on a ship with three intense warrior aliens who look
like gorgeous Egyptian gods—all who I begin to crave. They
have heads of animals and bodies of men. They look like
Anubis, lion man, and a minotaur.

And they're furious I'm a stowaway.

I'm not out of trouble yet...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Yve Vale loves spicy romance, fated mates, and redeemable supernatural bad boys who end up as cinnamon roll alphas for their woman.

She writes about strong females and their magical males, all set in paranormal worlds.

She is a lover and a fighter. This is why her books feature a fair amount of action, both in romantic endeavors and in battle.

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