

EMILIA HARTLEY

CURSED

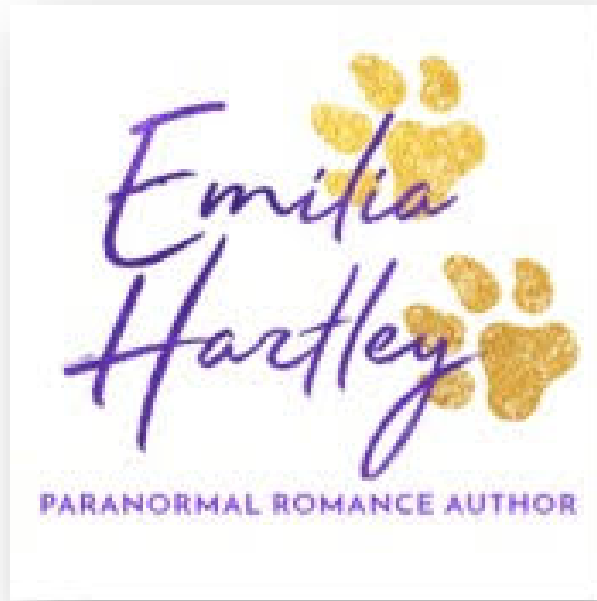
HERITAGE

CURSED HERITAGE

EMILIA HARTLEY

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What's New

Heartlies Box Sets

Thank you!

There was only one thing that could ruin the pure delight of a summer day beating down on my bare skin. I leaned back on the beach blanket and pulled my cap down over my eyes as a smile spread over my lips. Rocking my knee to the side, I bumped my best friend's knee.

When he didn't respond, I lifted my cap and peered in his direction. He wasn't even looking at me and my new bikini that obviously deserved compliments. Instead, the bright screen of his phone held his attention. The curl of his upper lip told me that the worst had happened.

I groaned and fell back.

Holden Callahan slicked back his short, sun-bleached hair and gave me a look that should have been conspiratorial frustration. I couldn't empathize, though. He could have put his phone away. He could have ignored her. I knew that he was going to go when she called, though.

"Go," I grumbled. "Your helicopter mom needs you."

Holden heaved a deep sigh.

I didn't respond. What was the point? I'd spent hours at the mall trying to pick out just the right bikini, a strappy pink number that left very little to the imagination, with the intention of distracting the man all summer.

I was home from college, and I needed every bit of my best friend's attention to make up for the distance that was between us while I was gone. Holden should have been

tripping over his words. He should have blushed when he looked in my direction. Perhaps we were too close as friends. There was a chance he couldn't even see me that way, though the thought cut right through my heart.

Even if I gave in to the curious warmth that I felt for him, he would someday find a mate, and the love I felt for him would pale in comparison. For shifters, mate bonds were the ultimate form of love. The kind of love between mates would never be overshadowed by the likes of childhood friends to lovers.

There was no point in dissecting that little ache in my chest. He and I had no future.

Holden was the eldest son of the Lakesedge Pack leaders. I was the princess of the Seelie fae court here. If our hearts became too mingled, it would be a conflict of interest. At least, that's how his mother treated it.

Ness Callahan was an admirable woman, but she looked at me like I was the scum of the earth. It didn't make any damn sense considering my mom was her best friend.

Annoyed, I sat up with a huff, slapped my hands against the blanket, and peered around for something to do. Might as well move on since I knew Holden would run off to do his mother's bidding.

"Ivy," he said, bumping his knee against mine.

I threw him a dark glare, my lips twisted in a moody pout. There was no way I would hide my annoyance from him. He deserved to know that I was disappointed. We had plans, and he was about to bail.

It was for family. He and I both knew about the importance of family. We were the heirs of our respective power structures—he had the shifter pack, and I had the court.

"If you let them tell you what to do for the rest of your life, you'll never be happy on your own."

I shoved off the ground and stomped across the sand. It burned the soles of my feet, but the heat could never be hotter than my wrath.

Where else could I go? It didn't matter where I turned, no one saw *me*. They saw the person I'd been in a past life, and there was nothing I could do to change their minds.

A scream built in my throat, but I swallowed it down. It fell like a stone in the pit of my stomach. My steps turned heavy, dragging through the sand.

"I'll be back!" Holden shouted from a distance.

The stone in my stomach turned into a boulder. I pressed my hand to my stomach like I could lift the heavy weight dragging me into quicksand.

Please, stay. Don't turn away from me yet.

But I heard him packing up our things behind me. Several heartbeats later, I heard the roar of his truck coming to life. We were a good distance from Lakesedge. It would take him forever to get back if his mother needed him for something important.

I cursed under my breath. This was going to be painful, but I wasn't about to let Ness scare me away. She could deal with my presence. I wasn't the threat that she treated me like. I was her son's friend.

I was my own person.

Spinning, I shouted, "Hold up!"

Holden cocked his head. The man raised a brow behind the windshield of his truck. He turned the engine off and slid out because he knew what I was about to offer.

How many times had we gotten stuck on the side of the road as teens because of this unreliable truck? How many times had I saved our skin with my fae magic?

Holden held out his hand without another word. He and I had spent so much of our lives side by side. It was all too easy to fall into step with one another, to know what the other was thinking, to let the worries of the world melt away while we were together.

Even though I was apprehensive to see his mother again, the touch of his hand in mine made all of my intrusive

thoughts melt away.

“Ready?” I asked, meeting his eyes.

His beast lingered in his eyes. The bright electric blue spark of his electricity glowed in his irises. It threw me for a moment. I had no idea why his storm dragon would be around right now.

He pulled the corner of his lower lip between his teeth and bit down as he nodded. There was no way I would miss it. He was nervous about something, though I couldn't quite tell what.

Holden

THE SIGHT of her walking away had sent my beast into a fury.

I almost wanted to curse my damn Mom for what she'd done. Mom didn't know how to be nice to Ivy, and it showed. No matter what I said to change her mind, Mom refused to be swayed. I didn't understand since she and Cerri, Ivy's mom, were best friends.

The dragon inside my body tore at me when Ivy walked away. I could feel its burning claws ripping through my flesh, its teeth sinking into my heart. The thing was getting harder and harder to control as of late.

It refused to listen. There was only one thing on its mind.

Mate. Mate. Mate.

My lower abdomen clenched tight with need. I had to adjust my shorts to hide the evidence of the beast's demands. The creature didn't care where I was or who I was with. It demanded one thing, and I wasn't giving in.

Every time I refused, the creature became stronger. It threatened to take everything away if I didn't give it what it wanted.

That was until Ivy returned from college. Her presence calmed the damned beast. So long as her rich earth scent lingered on the air, the beast remained controllable. I lingered in my best friend's presence so that I could taste peace for a little while.

Of course, Mom had to call me away right when I finally got a moment with Ivy. I knew that I should have gone home by myself. Letting Ivy step in-between to take us back to Lakesedge would cause trouble. Mom and Ivy were going to butt heads, but I couldn't help but want Ivy around, nonetheless.

Ivy and I walked hand in hand. One moment, the heat of the sun warmed our skin. The next, her magic wrapped us in a cool forest night and transported us back to my childhood home. The smell of warm coffee and furniture polish floated on the air.

Mom clapped her hands together and started to say something, but her words faltered when Ivy stepped out from behind me.

"Holden," Mom said in a tight greeting. There was a warning in that single word.

"Holden!" Sawyer said, throwing himself into my arms.

I caught my younger brother and twirled him around like he was a child. The twenty-two year-old man was only two years younger than me, though. Sawyer had a kind of bright charm around him at all times. He wore a permanent smirk and threw love around like it was pennies.

His cheery greeting cut off Mom's tight words, and he knew it.

"Ivy!" Sawyer plucked Ivy up from the floor and spun her around. He nuzzled her cheek and said, "Ooh, you're warm from the sun!"

My beast launched itself at him. The force of the beast's rage hit me and nearly sent me spinning. It clawed at my chest and shoved the air from my lungs. I hissed in pain and fought

the urge to bend under its assault. Somehow, I remained upright and kept my face impassive.

No one was allowed to touch my peace.

I shook myself and turned to Mom in an attempt to ignore the beast. The creature refused to relent. Its attention remained on my brother and Ivy, even though I could tell that he'd already released her and stepped away. The dragon still wanted to tear into my own brother for even being near her.

What was wrong with me? Mom spoke, telling me what she needed, but I heard none of it. The beast's roars and my own fears turned into a furious storm inside my skull. No matter how I tried to quiet it, the rage refused to relent.

"Have you heard anything I said?" Mom snapped.

I could hear that tone in the back of her voice, the bit of her magic trying to creep out. Mom would never use her power of command on us, but I could tell that she was fighting it back.

I had no idea why she hated Ivy so much. It'd been a gradual change. Ivy and I had been playmates as kids. Our moms let us run rampant everywhere. Then, as Ivy grew older, it was like Mom saw something in her that no one else could.

"Sorry," I said, scratching the back of my head.

"We have some shifters flying in from Thor's sanctuary Pack today. I need you to pick them up at the airport tonight."

I cocked my head. "That's why you needed me to come home asap? I rushed over as fast as I could because you made it sound like an emergency. My truck is still back at the beach."

A growl threatened to climb out of my throat. It was painfully obvious now that this had been a ploy to interrupt my day off.

"Have Sawyer do it," I said, turning back to Ivy.

Her lips twisted to the side. A heavy shadow sat over her eyes as she crossed her arms over her chest and looked away. When I glanced back, I caught Mom glaring daggers at her.

For once, I wished I'd inherited Mom's magic. A Barghest was only ever born in times of desperate need. From what I understood, Mom had been the head of a revolution that overturned an evil Alpha. By the time she had me and my brother, there was no more need for a Barghest, so the power skipped right over us.

Commanding family was a cruel use of the power that should have been used for justice. Still, it seemed like justice to me when electricity filled the air and thunder rumbled outside.

"Why can't Sawyer do it?" I asked, to break the tension.

Sawyer laughed. "I might have fucked up my engine."

"You did what?" Dad asked, his voice filling the room with menacing intent.

They were such a happy family.

Even though Ryder Callahan looked as though he was one minute away from blowing the entire house to smithereens, I could still feel the love in the air. Sawyer laughed and sheepishly scratched the back of his head, a gesture both he and his brother loved.

“The car had an oil leak, and I didn’t notice. I might have stalled the engine on the highway because there was no oil in it.” Sawyer took a step back because he knew hell would break loose.

He’d inherited his father’s beloved classic muscle car—and ruined it.

I stepped outside and dropped down onto one of the back porch steps. Head in my hands, I pouted in the shadow. I knew why Ness hated me.

Everyone had done their best to hide it from me, but I was an inquisitive child. I stuck my nose in places that it didn’t belong and found out things that I shouldn’t know. Pressing the heel of my palm to my chest, I wondered if she was in there somewhere.

In this life, I was Ivy Rae, daughter of a Seelie Queen and the King of Nightmares. However, in a past life, I’d been the Unseelie Queen Beryl who killed her own sister and hunted her niece just to make sure she kept ahold of her bloody throne.

Sawyer burst through the back door and leapt past the steps to land in front of me. “Dad is going to skin me for my wolf hide if I don’t work on his precious car. Want to help?”

I narrowed my eyes and tilted my head in confusion. He knew what I was and what that car was made out of.

“By help, I mean, want to hang out while I work on it? You don’t have to touch anything.” He extended a hand towards me.

I didn’t take it, but I did stand and agree to follow him over to the garage where Ryder Callahan’s old muscle car sat sadly. When Sawyer lifted the hood, I held my hands behind my back to be careful not to touch any iron and leaned forward to peer into the labyrinth of engine parts that made no sense to me.

Sawyer reached in to grab something and jerked his hand back. A slash of red bloomed across his palm. He cursed and turned to grab a rag. The blood dripped down his arm in a fresh red river that splattered the car, the floor, everything.

My head spun. The smell of iron drifted on the air. My stomach turned.

The red gash lingered in my vision even though he’d turned away and covered the wound. Before I could say anything, the world slipped out from under my feet. I barely felt the impact with the floor as darkness swallowed me.

“Holden is going to kill me,” Sawyer muttered.

A pair of gentle hands picked up my aching body. I winced and tried to sit up on my own.

“Don’t rush it,” Sawyer said quickly.

Blinking, the world came back into focus. My stomach still churned wildly, but it was overwhelmed by the ache in my body. My head throbbed fiercely.

“Did I pass out?” I asked.

Sawyer gave me a tight half-smile full of concern. He glanced to the side, as if afraid someone might enter at the wrong time. It wasn’t like we were doing anything. I had zero

interest in Sawyer. As my best friend's baby brother, he was more like a brother to me than anything else.

Besides, who would care if something happened between Sawyer and myself? I didn't ask the question out loud, because a small part of me hoped that someone would.

Shaking myself, I sat upright. My head still spun, but Sawyer helped me to a nearby stool. He disappeared inside for a moment and returned with a sugary drink in a can. I glanced at the brightly colored label and laughed.

"You're as bad as Aunt Vi." Still, I cracked the drink open and took a sip.

The tart sweetness danced across my tongue in a burst of carbonated fizzle that shot right to my head. Immediately, I felt the effects hit my bloodstream and wondered if my fae lineage made these drinks work a little faster than usual.

"Aunt Vi would turn her nose up at a canned energy drink, and you know it. She has all those fancy syrups on her counter so she can make her own potions—like she's the evil version of your mom." Sawyer laughed as he pumped the jack to lift the car.

Sawyer went on about our parents' friends while I kept an eye on the door that led inside. I could faintly hear Holden arguing with their mom. The words were lost, but I could hear the rising fury in Holden's voice. It almost made me want to get up and go to him, as if taking his hand would help quell his anger.

I wasn't that kind of person to him. And my presence would only piss his mom off even more.

Looking down at my hands, one holding the energy drink and the other pale and empty, I thought about my fear of blood. I couldn't even stand the sight of it. Small scratches made me sick to my stomach while larger cuts like Sawyer's made me pass out. The pain and destruction of it always hit me like a truck.

I hated it.

How could Ness look at me and see who I'd been in a past life when I couldn't even stand the sight of blood in this life? It didn't seem fair in the least.

Pushing my hair back, I stood. "I think I'm going to head home for the night."

Sawyer gave me an odd look, almost like he wanted me to stay but he knew better than to ask when his mother was on a rampage. In the end, he nodded.

Holden could find his own way back to the beach to get his truck. Once the sun went down, he could fly back in his dragon form. It wasn't my problem.

The bitter ache in my chest followed me as I stepped in-between and reappeared in the empty hall outside my apartment door. Silence hung in the air, letting me know that my upstairs neighbors were out for the day. Del and Arven liked to travel a lot, so it wasn't all that surprising to have the building to myself again.

However, a small box outside my door gave me pause. I noticed it several steps away because there was no missing the blue-striped box and its small bow. For half a heartbeat, I wondered if I'd missed my own birthday. When that didn't add up, I thought maybe Holden had a surprise in store for me.

The way my skin crawled as I stepped closer to the box told me otherwise. This wasn't from anyone with good intentions. My heart stuttered nervously, but I still bent and picked up the box before stepping inside.

I should have thrown it away. Instead, I set it on the counter and stared at it. I should have called Holden and asked him to open it for me. There were others I could rely on like Taliesin and Ostara, but they were beholden to my parents, and I didn't know if the situation needed to involve them yet.

The box alternated between pale, sky-blue stripes and dark, midnight-blue stripes. The silver bow glinted in the light coming through the broad windows facing the nearby lake. The box had fae magic written all over it. If opening the box

bound me to a fae contract, then it would be safer to chuck it in a closet and forget about it.

Better yet, I could find something iron to throw it into. An old ammunition box would do the trick. There had to be some hidden in the back of a thrift shop somewhere.

My hand drifted towards the ribbon without thinking. Before I could stop myself, I tugged the ribbon, and the bow came loose in a dramatic flourish.

“Well, it’s already open...”

I leaned forward to peer into the box. I half-expected an endless void or a star-studded sky. Instead, there was a simple note folded in the bottom of a rather simple box.

“Huh,” I said as I reached for the note.

It didn’t tingle my skin with magic when I lifted it. Just to make sure, I reached out with the deep well of my own magic and tried to scan it. That wasn’t really in my skill-set. Dad could read auras, but we weren’t really biologically related, so it wasn’t something I could even dream of doing.

Still, my wave of raw magic didn’t pick up anything. It didn’t hit any bumps or read any other signatures. Curiosity got the best of me, and I found myself unfolding the note.

Dearest Ivy Rae Glenwood-James,

You are in possession of something that was stolen from me more than two decades ago. If you do not return it to me post haste, then I would like to inform you that I am coming for what is owed to me.

There was no signature, no list of items that needed to be returned, not even a date they needed to be returned by. It could have been the most ominous overdue notice from the library, but it said that the items had been taken two decades ago.

Also, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been to the library.

I shoved the note back into the box and jammed the lid back on as if that could hide the awful vibes oozing from the

piece of paper. It did very little to comfort me, so I took it and flung it into the clothes dryer so that the iron in the machine could block the fae aura emanating from the box.

As a kid, I'd grown up between the mortal realm and the fae realms. My mother had command of a number of small realms all stitched to the Seelie castle like a patchwork quilt to be discovered one by one. I'd run into kelpies, pixies, boggarts, elves, and so many others. The fae realm was my backyard, and I was intimately familiar with it as the local Seelie princess.

This freaking box was unlike anything I'd ever felt before. Even Dad's lodge in the Nightmare land was nicer than this—Mom claimed that was because it was a reflection of Dad's good nature and that the realm had been a lot creepier when it was in the last guy's hands.

I turned my back to the washer and slid down it. The enamel coating on the outside protected my skin, though I could feel the numbing iron beneath it. Any little chip in the enamel would burn my skin, and yet I still lingered on the floor near it because that box had me in a metaphorical chokehold.

All thoughts of Holden's pissy mother vanished. I even forgot about his truck, stranded at the beach up north. The creepy note left my skin crawling. The fading light outside turned the massive windows into a black mirror that refused to give away anything that might be peering inside.

There were wards on the building, but it hadn't stopped someone from leaving that box. I no longer trusted the wards to keep anything out. I wanted to leave and run back to Holden, but I knew he'd be busy. His mother wanted to keep him away from me like I was the greatest threat known to man.

Yet, here I was on the floor with my arms around my knees to keep myself from shaking.

After several moments, I started to feel rather stupid. I lifted my head and looked around to make sure no one saw me

have a meltdown on the floor before I stood and went to shower away the beach sand still clinging to my calves.

Even that didn't help. Getting naked to shower only made it worse. I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. It was like a masked man with a knife would break through my door any moment, and I'd have no choice but throw my hands in the air and scream like a Hollywood vixen meant to die.

"I'm being so dramatic," I muttered under my breath before stepping under the showered spray to let it wash over my face.

A creak outside the bathroom door made me shriek and clutch the shower curtain so tight I ripped it from its hooks. The curtain collapsed and the rod thumped across the floor as water sprayed out in all directions.

Magic burst through the room in a sudden rush. The door flew open and a figure raced towards me. Shrieking, I clutched the shower curtain to my chest. The faceless figure reared a knife that glinted in the bathroom light. The smell of magic curled under my nose and tickled my chest.

The figure brought the knife down...and it passed right through my form.

Adrenaline seared my veins as I stared blankly at the illusion that my own uncontrollable magic had conjured. My fear had manifested into the visage of an unknowable figure wielding a knife. Not for the first time, I seethed at the power trying to escape my body at all times.

Cursing, I quickly shut the water off and waited, straining to hear anything beyond the bathroom door. The creak outside hadn't been brought on by the illusion. There was a chance there was actually someone in my apartment. When I heard nothing again, I scowled and waved a hand. Fae magic dried me from head to toe, including my hair. A glamour conjured soft pajamas, which would have been a pain to run in if there was anyone actually in the house.

Dry and dressed, I opened every door and scanned every room, closet, and cupboard. The creak must have been the old

warehouse building settling, I decided. Though my heart still thumped like death had been waiting just around the corner.

I glared in the direction of my washing machine like it owed me money.

A knock at the door made me yelp and jump. For a second, my glamour faltered and left me naked. My hands flew to my private bits even though the visitor was still on the other side of a locked door.

I carefully tiptoed up to the peephole in the door only to see that it was Holden on the other side. Immediate relief flooded my system and threatened to drop me to my knees. I pressed a hand to the door to keep myself upright and called out that I'd be back in a moment.

Once I was dressed, I came back, ripped the door open, and threw myself at Holden. He staggered back, but only barely since I weighed almost nothing at all. His hands went to my hair, smoothing it back almost instinctively.

This close, I could hear the growl of his dragon in his chest. My own fear eased, and I let my cheek fall against his soft t-shirt.

“What’s wrong?” he asked quickly.

I debated telling him. There was a strong possibility that the box and note was nothing more than a fae prank. I'd met a lot of fae over the course of my life, and I wouldn't put it past most of them to do something like this.

Sighing, I spoke into his shirt. “Nothing. Don't worry about it.”

He made a noise like he didn't believe me, but he wasn't going to press.

I leaned back. “Why did you come out here? Don't you have to run around for your mom?”

“Sawyer told me you passed out earlier. I wanted to come check on you and make sure you were okay.” He stroked my hair again as he looked down at me with glowing eyes.

His beast was spending a lot of time near the surface lately, I noticed. I wondered if that was a recent development. Had today been too stressful? Or had something else changed while I'd been away at school?

"I'm okay," I said, flashing a fake smile.

Holden grunted, unconvinced. He knew me all too well, which brought a real smile to my face. While I wanted to bring him inside and cuddle up against him to watch a movie, I knew that he likely had work to do.

"Don't worry about me." I pulled away and did a small spin to show him I was fine. "Sawyer gave me an energy drink to perk me up again."

"I heard a racket downstairs. Something happened, and you're hiding it from me."

Sometimes, he was *too* perceptive.

"I, uh, slipped in the shower. When I grabbed the curtain to catch myself, I pulled the whole thing down in the process." There was almost no chance he would believe me, but I hoped he accepted my lie as evidence that I didn't want to talk about it.

Sure, I could have been more direct and told him that I didn't want to share what was going on, but that might have raised more flags. I hoped that my nonchalant white lie was enough to settle him.

Holden grunted and came over the drop onto my old couch. It was a curbside find that I'd meticulously cleaned, all the way down to the old wood panels on the front. For a moment, Holden vanished in the pile of pillows I kept heaped atop the couch. His head reappeared only to cast a glare in my direction.

"There's a reason you never have men over," he said, his eyes flashing bright with his beast as he spoke.

His words were at war with his beast's presence. The man had lied to me, in a way. Though, I wasn't sure what he meant by that. I shook my head and went to grab a bag of chips from the pantry.

The box and the ominous note were forgotten in the recesses of my dryer for the time. Holden asked me to take him back to his truck, but he wanted to have more of the night to himself since his mother rudely interrupted. Apparently, she didn't need someone at the airport until tomorrow.

She only wanted to interrupt our first day together again.

I yanked a pillow to my chest and scowled at the television.

“How's school?” Holden asked.

He'd chosen to stay home and work for the family business while I'd flung myself as far from Lakesedge as I could without leaving New York. I'd begged him to come with me and enjoy time away from home, but he'd remained steadfast even after we'd both waited a few years.

“It's lonely,” I admitted.

Being so far away from my best friend sucked. I wished he'd come with me, but I couldn't tell him that without him thinking he'd abandoned me. I didn't want to manipulate him, even by accident, so I kept the rest of my complaints to myself.

Holden

TRUTH BE TOLD, I could have flown back to my truck on my own. I didn't need Ivy's help to get there, especially under the cover of night. The beach was out in the rural parts of New York. There were no streetlights polluting the air with an orange glow that would give away my beast.

It would have been easy to head upstate on my own. I didn't want to go by myself, though. I wanted to be near my best friend. She'd been away for so long. Her studies at college kept her away from me—from all of us.

We sat on the overstuffed couch, Ivy lying sideways so that her head was on my lap. She could have lounged with her

head on a soft pillow. Instead, she chose my thigh. My beast growled happily, but I shoved its thoughts away.

While she'd been gone, my beast had become obsessive in its hunt for a mate. I spent most nights at the bars in town. There, I nursed my drinks while I waited for the beast to choose a woman from the crowd. The damned creature was never satisfied with the women there, even as it growled for a mate.

Every night passed, my bed still empty, my beast still on the prowl. Now that Ivy was home for the summer, though, the beast had settled. Ivy gave me back the peace that I'd been missing so desperately. So, I didn't complain when she wriggled and adjusted her position over and over again.

I was just happy to be able to lean my head back and breathe for once.

I'd heard her shriek earlier. Ivy had screamed so loud that I'd heard it downstairs in the front lobby. The mail lockers had rattled as if shuddering in fear with her. She still refused to tell me what'd happened. I'd noticed the mess in the bathroom, the curtain rod on the wet floor.

It matched with her story, but a simple slip wouldn't leave someone as powerful as her so shaken. Ivy was more than capable of taking care of herself. Maybe she fainted at the sight of blood, but she could level an entire block if she wanted to.

My beast had no right to worry about her as much as it did. The dragon fidgeted inside me. Its constant movement betrayed its vigilance. It was on the lookout for whatever had spooked Ivy earlier.

Though, I doubted I would find it now. With the both of us here, no one would dare attack us.

That's what I thought until the massive floor-to-ceiling windows behind us burst in a shower of glass and noise. Ivy yelped and threw up her hands. I covered her while her magic covered us.

The thump of two bodies hit the floor nearby. My beast snarled and pressed against the inside of my skin. If I shifted in here, I'd take the whole building down with me. I wasn't a wolf like my brother. I'd inherited Dad's dragon genes, which meant my beast was far too large to shift inside a building.

The beast shoved its way into my fingers, my eyes, and along my back. My nails became claws and my sight sharpened. Pain ripped up my spine as it lengthened into a tail that crackled with electricity.

Ivy twisted to put both hands to my chest. Her eyes were wide as she searched me up and down, perhaps for signs of blood. When color finally returned to her face, she sighed in relief.

I strained to listen for the two intruders. When I heard a familiar grunt and a tinkling rain of glass, I thumped my tail in annoyance.

"You got the wrong apartment," I grumbled, the dragon making my voice gravelly.

Ivy laughed. She quickly slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle it, but the humor still sparkled in her eyes as she watched her neighbors stand up and dust themselves off.

Under Ivy's magical umbrella, she and I remained untouched by the glass while her neighbors were a little worse for wear. Delphine stood and wiped at a bit of blood on her cheek with the back of her hand. Arven, with his demonic elf form unveiled, went to his mate to check on her.

The man had a massive shard of glass in his back, and he looked like he didn't even feel it. Maybe his red skin offered him advantages like pain resistance in exchange for being so noticeable.

"Shit," Del said, looking out the shattered window. "I owe Cerri for the damned windows again."

"Maybe they shouldn't have put such large access points on the front of the building if they didn't want people to use them," Arven muttered.

Ivy, unable to contain her laughter anymore, burst out with glee that filled the room with tiny white blooms that rained over the mess of glass. Ivy's magic curled through the room. It was all at once familiar and filled me with alarm.

"Be right back!" I scooped Ivy into my arms and raced to the bedroom.

Her laughter became choked. Her eyes went wide as she dug her nails into my shoulders.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice strained, before more magic erupted from her.

Ivy bucked into my body as an explosion of fae magic brought a shower of petals swirling around us. The sensation of falling hit my stomach and dragged me through portal after portal. We tumbled through worlds, arm in arm together. One moment, the sun beat down upon us. The next, we crashed through green waters only to sink through another portal.

Finally, we slammed back down into Ivy's bed. The room was filled with dense flora that made the air heavy with aromas. Beneath me, Ivy heaved. Her breaths came fast and shallow, one right after the other.

"We're home," I told her as I cradled her to my chest.

I rolled over to pull my weight off her. Tugging her into my lap, I stroked her hair until her breaths settled, and she returned to normal.

"I'm so sorry again," she said into my shirt.

This was what our lives had been like for a long time. It was nothing new. Ivy had been pulled into these power explosions for as long as she could remember. And the moment I learned to speak, I promised her I'd be there to hold her hand every time it happened.

That's what best friends were for, right?

Del knocked at the bedroom door and asked if everything was all right.

Ivy responded with a loud, dramatic groan.

The neighbors cracked the bedroom door open and lingered in the entryway. Del wore a look of concern with her lips twisted to the side like they were holding back information that might have been useful right about now. Arven, on the other hand, seemed astonished.

Del knew something that Arven did not.

Stories of what'd happened before Ivy and I were born had been passed around for years now. Our parents had each been the driving force behind massive power upheavals in Lakesedge. Del had been around for at least one event.

Now, I couldn't help but wonder if Del had learned something around that time—something she wasn't allowed to share with us.

“Would you like help cleaning this up?” Arven peered up at the ceiling covered in dense swaths of ivy.

Del waved her hand in the air. “We'll call Vi the garden exterminator later. She can deal with it in the blink of an eye. You and I should get to the glass, though. That's our fault.”

Arven nodded and let Del yank him away from the bedroom door.

Alone, I peered down at Ivy. “How are you feeling?”

She groaned again. Hand over her eyes like she was in the middle of a hangover, she said, “I'm feeling empty as hell right about now.”

“Pretty sure Hell is full of assholes. It's not a very empty place. Vi can attest to that.”

“Smartass,” she snapped, though the corners of her mouth turned upwards.

As badly as I wanted to stay, I really needed to get my truck. And I wasn't about to ask Ivy to take me. She'd been through enough tonight. Asking her to tap into her fae magic right after this seemed cruel.

With a sigh, I extracted myself from her bed. The humor fell from Ivy's face, leaving her looking drained. She flopped

back onto the bed with her arms outstretched and her eyes on the ceiling.

I didn't say *I have to go* or *see you later* because my beast wouldn't allow me to acknowledge the fact that I had to leave. The creature clawed at me. It gnawed on my insides, leaving me aching with every step I had to take away from her.

As the first son of the Pack Alpha, there were duties I had to see to. If the Pack would someday become mine, I needed to show them that I could be trusted. They would have to rely on me someday, and I refused to let them down—even if *them* was only my demanding mother right now.

In the living room, I pulled Del aside. While the elven assassin was intimidating, she'd been a minor part of my life for so long that I saw her more as a weird aunt than anything else. I asked her to keep an eye on Ivy for me. Something had Ivy spooked when I'd arrived. If anyone could handle it, it was Del.

Honestly, I think that was the only reason Rhoan let his daughter live outside of the Seelie castle. While Ivy's mom approved of adventure and discovery, her father was a little less indulgent. Rhoan wanted to make sure that Ivy remained safe at all times, and Del was an efficient assassin. No one would dare venture too close to the warehouse apartments while she was here.

Arven apologized for the windows once more, as if I lived here. It wasn't my apartment, though I did wonder what'd chased them this far.

Instead of asking questions, I went up to the roof and let my beast free of my body. The weight of the creature made the building groan but only long enough for me to take off. Leaping into the air, I felt the electrical currents align to my scales.

Flying should have felt freeing. Instead, I couldn't stop worrying about what I was leaving behind.

Despite the summer heat lingering from the daytime, the inside of the apartment turned cold from the breeze flowing through the shattered windows. I could have called my parents and had them board it up. Mom could have fixed the broken glass with a snap of her fingers.

I didn't want them to think I was in danger, though. Dad would drag me kicking and screaming back to the castle. Being here, in the mortal realm, meant that my power was a little more muted. When I lived in the Seelie castle, explosions like the one earlier were a lot more common.

I wasn't ready to go back just yet.

Despite how tired I was, sleep refused to come. Hollow and raw, I stared at the ceiling and the vines hanging from it. My thoughts wandered back to the note in the dryer. A chill ran up my spine. I pulled the blankets closer and curled in on myself, but that did little to alleviate the fear turning my veins to ice.

It had to have been a prank. Some bored fae wanted to watch me freak out for the night. I almost wanted to kick off the sheets and stomp into the living room to see if I could find the fae watching me melt down. I didn't care if I got glass in my feet so long as I could chuck the little prankster out the broken windows.

Anger rose to fill the empty ache in my chest. I thrashed to get free of the sheets and shoved my feet into a pair of

slippers. In the living room, a bit of glass crunched under the soles of the slippers, but none pierced all the way through.

I waved my hand and let the wood floor swallow the last of the glass in the fine grain. In the morning, the light would shine on the veins of gleaming glass in the wood, and it would be beautiful. But that was about all I had left in me unless I wanted to reach really deep for more magic.

There was a magical well lurking in the deepest corners of my body, but I hesitated to reach for it. That's where the explosions came from, like a tsunami washing over the shores of my being to devastate everything around me. I feared that it belonged to *her*.

I didn't want to reach into that magic and become Beryl.

It's what everyone expected of me. They looked at my face and saw a woman from their past. If I touched that magic, I'd only be proving to them that I could follow in her footsteps.

"I can't even stand the sight of blood!" I stomped my foot in protest like there was someone around to hear.

Ripping open the fridge door, I glared into the bright yet empty expanse. I settled on a lone cheese-stick of questionable origins, ripped it open, and tore into it. The cheese quelled my frustration, but I was still left staring out into the night beyond the open window.

As I watched, a massive hand reached up from the bottom and planted itself on the floor. Ice hit my veins. Every part of my body screamed to run. The hand belonged to a spindly arm that, as of yet, had no body. Another hand, the twin to its matching set, rose and grabbed ahold of the floor.

My apartment was on the second story, meaning whoever was trying to climb in had scaled at least twelve feet of brick wall outside.

Oh, hell no.

Stumbling back, I tried to step in-between to get out of here. My magic sparked only to sputter and flicker out of existence. Guttled, I inhaled sharply and spun on my heel. My slipper fell off in the process and tangled between my feet.

Tumbling forward, I closed my eyes and braced for what I was about to do. Did I really want to tap into the magic I just said I would never touch? The smell of rot and decay in the air told me that I didn't want to stay here.

I had to uphold a standard, though. If I said I wasn't going to touch Beryl's magic, then I wouldn't. Which left me stranded with some creepy ass fae crawling in through the windows that my neighbors busted.

Hooray for me and my standards.

I scrambled to my feet as a shadow overwhelmed the interior of my apartment. Whatever had climbed into the window was huge, and I wasn't about to look back to check. I lunged for the door and threw myself into the hall.

This neighborhood was all old warehouses. Some had been refurbished into apartments, but there were some that were still untouched. That meant there was a lot of iron in the neighborhood. It didn't bother me until I got really close, but I hoped that it was enough to dissuade whatever was chasing me.

I leapt down the empty stairs and landed hard, the impact vibrating up my ankle. Every step forward sent pain shooting up my leg. Limping, I raced out the door and towards a nearby warehouse that I knew to be untouched.

At the door, I yanked to slide it open. A padlock pulled me up short. I glared down at the little metal contraption that made me yank a muscle in my shoulder. If only I'd brought a pair of bolt cutters. Normally, my magic would have helped me get around it, but I was unable to do anything of the sort in this state.

For the first time since fleeing the apartment, I glanced back. I scanned the darkness for the hulking shape of the shadow I saw earlier. The fae wouldn't be that large, but it was a good approximation.

Nothing leapt out at me, literally or figuratively. For a moment, I sighed in relief.

I should have gone up to Del and Arven's apartment, but I didn't want to interrupt anything freaky they might have been up to. They liked to get wild after coming home from Del's missions, and I did not want to show up on their doorstep like the kid that threw up in the middle of the night.

I wasn't a child.

I was the next in line to the Lakesedge Seelie Court—*the court*.

The lake grabbed my attention. Beneath it sat Mom's court, a place where fae could gather in the mortal plane. Of all the places in Lakesedge, it would have the most wards. I just had to get there.

Unable to step in-between, I had one option left. I shoved away from the warehouse door and ran. My feet slapped the pavement and stung with every step, reminding me that I'd lost my slippers back at the apartment.

This wouldn't be happening if I still lived back at the Seelie Castle. Nothing would be able to break in and scare the shit out of me there.

However, back there, I'd have to deal with the many stares and whispers of the people waiting for me to become Beryl again. I would have to deal with Dad's overbearing presence.

I wasn't a teenager anymore. In fact, I was well into my twenties—okay, twenty-three isn't well into my twenties, but I was still an adult who deserved space and respect.

"Stupid freaking fae," I muttered under my breath.

It hadn't let up. I could feel its gaze like piercing needles boring into my skin. Nothing would stop it. The creature was always right behind me. If I turned, it would be there, ready to snatch me up.

"I'm stronger than any damned fae," I grumbled, feet becoming numb as I ran. "I am a princess. I am indomitable. I am..."

Toe ramming against something on the ground, I tumbled face forward. A yelp escaped my mouth as I flung my arms

outwards to catch myself. My palms scraped against the pavement and did little to soften my impact.

My head spun. An ache bloomed in my jaw from the way my teeth clattered when I fell. “Son of a...”

A hand closed around my ankle.

Screeching, I kicked back. My foot collided with something seemingly made of bone. It was hard to tell with the nerves in my feet going dead. I’d run too far and still managed to get caught.

This was bullshit.

That deep well of power inside me pulsed as if to remind me that it was there, waiting to be used. I cursed and tried to turn away from it. I would not rely on a power that belonged to someone else.

I was not Beryl.

This wasn’t *my* power.

Teeth clenched, I spun and prepared myself for a physical fight. I could scratch at my attacker, kick, bite, whatever I needed to do to escape.

But the fae was gone. I blinked at the empty air where there should have been a hulking fae creature. The empty air still stank, proving that it hadn’t all been in my head.

“Ivy Rae?” a familiar voice asked.

Sawyer stepped out of the shadows. He rolled his shoulder like he’d been hit and was shrugging off pain. The man didn’t have a stitch of clothing on him, telling me that he’d been running as a wolf tonight.

For a moment, panic stirred in my dumb little pea-brain. I convinced myself that Sawyer had been the one to attack me. It’d been his hand on my ankle.

“That’s so dumb,” I told myself out loud.

Sawyer stopped and cocked his head. His eyes were ever so slightly wide, like he didn’t know if *I* was an illusion or not.

Despite the ground being dirty and cold—this was Syracuse, after all—I threw my arms wide and flopped back to stare blankly at the sky. A veil of light pollution hid the stars that would have been plentiful in the Seelie realms. A yearning for home punched me in the gut, but it wasn't the stars that I missed.

“Where's your brother?” I asked Sawyer.

“Why are you asking about him when you're half naked on a random street? Your feet are disgusting by the way.” There was a pinched tone in Sawyer's voice, like he expected Holden to come out of nowhere and clock him upside the head for letting me sit on the ground.

“I...” What was I going to tell him? That I was scared by a big fae trying to break in through the windows that my neighbors shattered?

In retrospect, this seemed very stupid. Had there even been a monster chasing me? I hadn't seen anything since I left the apartment. Though I'd felt someone watching me, that could have just been my own fear. My magic had manifested illusions to scare me once today.

Even dead tired as I was, I wouldn't have put it past that extra bit of magic inside me. There was a chance that I was simply going insane because of my own stubborn determination to ignore the deep well of magic that once belonged to a bitch queen.

It really was a strong possibility.

I threw a hand in the air. “Help me up.”

Sawyer grumbled something, grabbed my wrist, and unexpectedly threw me over his shoulder. Being this close to a naked Sawyer wasn't the most comfortable experience. In fact, I threw myself out of his arms and winced when I landed on my throbbing feet again.

“Yeah? You want to walk like that?” Sawyer asked, brows raised in challenge.

He had no idea how stubborn I could be. Chin up, I turned and started back towards home. A chill raced down my spine.

The thought of being home alone filled me with so much fear that it overrode the pain in my feet.

Nifty, but also really bothersome.

Sawyer stepped up alongside me. Just a barefoot woman and a naked man walking down a Syracuse street in the middle of the night. My warehouse apartment was on the border of Lakesedge in a neighborhood that didn't have many inhabitants. While the scene we made could have gotten us in trouble for indecency, there were very few people here to give a damn.

Which also made it easy to hunt people out this way.

I wrapped my arms around my middle. "Sawyer, do you mind sleeping on my couch tonight? I have some of your brother's clothes you can borrow."

His lips twisted to the side like he wasn't sure. It wasn't like I was inviting him into my bed. Tonight wasn't that kind of night, and I wasn't into Sawyer like that.

"Don't act like it's weird," I said, punching him in the arm like a dude might.

"Ah, of course. You're right. Nothing about tonight is weird at all. My mistake. I was out of line for thinking such things."

I scowled at the sarcastic wolf shifter. Sawyer usually would have wiggled his brows or smirked wryly. Instead, concern and weariness still lined his face, betraying the real frustration behind his sarcasm.

I didn't know what to tell him. I couldn't outright say that I'd been chased out this way by a creature I wasn't even sure existed. There was a large possibility that my magic was acting out again. It'd happened once—no, twice already.

Sighing, I ran my hands over my face. The feeling of blood and grime from my palms made me cringe. I'd forgotten what I mess I was.

"Fine. I'll stay, but if Holden drops by for a surprise visit and loses his mind, it's your job to talk him down." Sawyer

gave a shrug, both hands in the air.

I scowled. Why would Holden be upset if he found Sawyer sleeping on my couch? It didn't make any sense to me. The Holden I knew would be happy as long as I was safe.

Right?

My trailer sat outside of town. I was number nine, on the edge of a small trailer park. It wasn't much, but it was mine. My dragon wanted larger rooms, taller ceilings, more privacy. I couldn't give it any of those things on the little bit of money I made working for the family business.

That made it sound like Dad paid me almost nothing. That wasn't the case. My dragon instincts told me to put money away. Deep down, I dreamed of a day when everything I'd saved would buy a house for my mate. If I kept putting away everything I earned past the bare minimum living expenses, then my mate would be happy someday.

The thought of a mate drove my beast wild. It thrashed inside me and sent my blood rushing south like there was a woman in the room that I could plant my seed into. It was just me in here, alone with my need.

When my hand drifted to my shaft, thoughts of one woman rose to my mind. I tried to think of anyone else because I knew that she couldn't be my mate. Even if Ivy made me feel at peace, she didn't think of me that way. At least, she'd never said anything to indicate otherwise.

But I could smell her on the air when my hand slid down the shaft and pleasure sparked in my core. I could see her smile and the way her eyes flashed when she looked at me. Every small detail of my best friend flashed through my mind until that spark turned into an inferno that spilled over.

When I was finished, I sighed and stared at the ceiling. The haze of need that'd clouded my mind washed away, leaving me alone in bed. The cold air crept in and reminded me that there was no one to warm the sheets, no one to care for, no one to fill the yawning void that this dragon was ripping open.

Ivy eased the pain and quieted the dragon, but for how long? I couldn't rely on my best friend to fill the void that wasn't meant for her. She had her own life. College would take her away as soon as summer drew to an end. Then I would be alone for real.

A college education could take anywhere from four to six years, more if she wanted a bigger, fancier degree. My beast was already on the edge at all times. There would be moments of reprieve when she returned on breaks, but I wasn't sure if my beast could handle the back and forth. I was already on edge. There was no telling how much longer the beast could go without a mate.

This already felt like too long. I didn't have two years, let alone four. The beast needed a mate *now*.

With a growl, I shoved out of bed and cleaned up. There was a lot to get done. The new shifters from Thor's sanctuary should be flying in today, which meant two trips to the airport outside of the city.

I had half a mind to tell Mom to find someone else to do it. I needed to get to Ivy.

Even though I'd tried to ease my need, the beast was already pacing again. At this rate, it would rip its way out of me and go hunting on its own. The beast wasn't looking for prey. It would be looking for a woman to love, and I couldn't let this idiot fly over a city in broad daylight. That's not how one found a mate.

When I reached for my phone, there was a message from my brother waiting for me. He warned me that Ivy's apartment would smell like him because she'd asked him to stay the night.

My hand clenched around the phone as a growl rose out of me. The screen cracked, the fissure running across the glass and over his words. The bubble with three bouncing dots rose to let me know that he had more to say. It didn't matter what he said, I was going to tear him to pieces just for being near her...

She seemed freaked out last night. Found her on the side of the road. I slept on the couch because it made her feel safe.

I sucked in a breath through my nose. There was no way that I could make the airport trip today. I had to get to Ivy and make sure that she was all right. Something had happened. It was more than just a breach of her arcana. If I didn't go to her, my beast would never forgive me. It would destroy me from the inside out.

Trade jobs with me today, I sent back to my brother.

The three dots popped up again. Then they dropped, like he was considering his next words carefully. In the end, all he sent was a *Fine, you owe me.*

I didn't owe Sawyer shit, but that was my jealous beast talking. My brother was a good man, and I knew that—even if my beast wanted to throw him into the sun for being around Ivy when I wasn't around.

The three of us grew up together. We'd been together for each scraped knee and for each failed report card. My brother wasn't moving in on *my territory*. My anger was unjustified, and it left a bad taste in the back of my mouth.

Before I could make it to the front door, Mom appeared on the front porch. I peered out the window and stifled my groan. The woman would be able to hear it from there, of that much, I was sure. She had the best hearing out of all of us even if she'd died twice.

Of course, she heard the creak of my steps as I backed away from the window. Hearing that I was up, she shoved through the front door without so much as a cautionary knock.

I scowled and spread my arms wide. "What if I'd been naked?"

I wasn't, though I was wearing a pair of sweatpants with a mystery stain and an anime t-shirt that Mom always mispronounced. At this point, I wore the shirt because it irked her.

She waved away my question. "You've been having issues adjusting lately."

I damn near recoiled like the woman had slapped me. Mom had never laid hands on us growing up, but her words were sharp enough to do the trick.

"Excuse me?" I asked, voice strained.

My dragon pulled back its lips in a snarl. It was probably in my eyes, lighting them up with electricity. The air charged, and every hair on my body stood on end. I had to swallow it back. While Dad could handle the electricity, Mom didn't process it the same way—even if it was part of her arcana.

She slapped a ticket down on the table. "I've paid for you to go out to Colorado. You've never met your family out that way. It would do you some good to get fresh air and meet your grandmother for the first time."

"Uncle Morgan is right here." I gestured to the window as if Dad's brother was right there and not in the city with Aunt Vi. "Dad has said it himself that Uncle Morgan is the only family he has left."

Mom pursed her lips. A bit of worry danced in her eyes as she took me in. I had to look away because I knew the light of my beast would be in my eyes.

She wanted to send me away to help me, but I knew that wasn't what I needed. I needed a mate. I needed love. This was something no one could help me find. I had to do it on my own.

Mom wasn't going to listen to that, though. If she thought she could help, she would do her damndest. It was just her nature.

I went over and pulled her into a hug. It was easy to forget how small she was. A powerhouse in her own right, she still seemed tiny in my arms.

She pushed away and took a step back, her eyes downcast at the plane ticket on the table. “You should think about it. The trip is non-refundable. If you decide not to go, we’ll be out of a chunk of cash.”

I wrinkled my nose in disgust at the guilt she’d tried to inject into this. It would be no skin off my back to dip into my savings and shove the money back at her. The beast didn’t even argue. The small chunk out of my savings meant little if I could stay with Ivy for a little while longer.

Glancing down at the dates on the plane ticket, I realized what Mom was doing. The trip would be soon, right around the corner during the peak of summer.

“Why do you hate Ivy?” I asked blatantly.

Mom’s jaw dropped. She clutched a hand to her chest. When she opened her mouth to speak, a rumble of thunder overhead gave away her true feelings. She quickly snapped her mouth shut.

She wasn’t going to openly admit it, but that was all I needed.

“I think it’s time for you to leave,” I said to my own mother.

It felt wrong, but I had no patience left for the day, and I’d just woken up. My beast knew what I needed. If I didn’t get to Ivy soon, it would do it for me. Claws raked against my insides. I bit back my wince and kept my chin high so Mom couldn’t see the war raging inside me.

While she was right that I wasn’t exactly doing great, she was wrong to make assumptions on my behalf.

“We can’t send you to Thor’s sanctuary. As good as he is with most shifters, he’s not prepared to deal with a dragon. There’s a lot of space in Colorado. The mountains can be a good place for you to get out some of your frustration.” She paused, lips twisted to the side. “I know you’re probably ready for your own Pack, but your father isn’t that old. He and I were about your age when we met. Your dad has a lot of years

left at the head of this Pack. Your beast will have to be patient.”

Is that what she thought I wanted? While I was grateful that she couldn't tell that I was ready to mate, it was a bit frustrating to have my own mother be so oblivious to the real problems.

Without another word, I shook my head. I turned and left her alone in the kitchen. There weren't really a whole lot of places to hide in a trailer, but I slammed my bedroom door behind me to really drive home the fact that I was done with visitors.

Ivy needed me.

Ivy

I SAT on the kitchen island and stared down the dryer. Images of the long-armed fae creature in my window still bounced inside my mind, ricocheting off the walls of my skull until my head throbbed. I jumped off the counter and strode over to the dryer so I could rip the door open and snatch the letter from the box.

Crumpling it in my hand, I reached for my magic and used it to bring life back to the dead paper. It unfurled green buds as I tossed it to the floor.

The door burst open, and Holden rushed in. He had a hand at my elbow before I could even think to step back. Looking up at him, I wanted to ask why he was here and not running off to the airport like he'd been asked.

“Are you okay?” The light of his beast filled his eyes when he spoke.

The sight of it made my heart stutter. The sincerity in his voice stole my breath for a moment. I had no words because neither mind nor lungs could form any.

That didn't last forever, though. I put the pieces of the puzzle together and scowled.

“Sawyer called you, didn't he?”

Holden rocked back on his heels. His lips pursed ever so slightly, letting me know he was thinking over his next move.

I couldn't be mad at Sawyer, though a bit of anger curled in the pit of my stomach. I'd asked Sawyer for help, and he'd passed it on. For some reason, however, having Holden here embarrassed me.

Nothing bad had really happened last night. The note must have been a prank that I'd taken too seriously. The fae crawling in through my shattered window had been a glamour brought on by my own uncontrollable magic. And now that Holden was here during the day, when all was clear to me, I couldn't help but feel the hot flush of embarrassment across my face.

I pulled my arm from Holden's gentle touch and reached to push my hair back like I needed to do something with my empty hands. “Don't worry about it.”

His prying stare pressed into my skin like the searching hands of a worried lover. It made me ache for things that could never come true. Why was I suddenly sprouting feelings for my best friend? His concern for my safety was nothing new, so it wasn't like he was showing a side of himself I'd never seen before. There was no point in ruining our friendship, either. I didn't want to give this a try only to lose everything we currently had when his true mate finally came along.

My head was a damned mess. I needed some caffeine to help clear it.

I snatched my wallet, jammed it into my pocket, and turned to him. Before I could tell him I wanted to hit up Mom's café, my sight fell on the letter I'd turned back into a plant. Holden stared at it, too. His head was bent to the side, his lips parted in an unspoken question.

The letter had grown into a small tree. The white bark reminded me of the pale parchment that the letter had been

written on. Small branches spread out from the trunk, but they only reached about as high as the cushions of the couch. Their little leaves glimmered with an iridescence that caught the light streaming in through the open window.

“What the hell did I do?” I muttered.

Holden pointed at it. “This is your doing?”

I narrowed my eyes at it. Honestly, I wasn’t really sure if this was my doing.

Something about the miniature tree struck me as familiar. It made a place deep in my soul ache like a distant memory that I couldn’t quite unlock. I scowled at the tree as I rubbed my solar plexus.

Without answering Holden, I stepped around the tree and left the apartment. I could have stepped in-between to put more space between myself and the tree, but I waited for Holden to catch up.

His footsteps rushed towards me. “Are we not going to talk about the bonsai tree in your living room?”

“I’m heading to Mom’s café to grab a drink and ask Dad to fix my window,” I said, ignoring Holden’s question.

The air between us sparked with electricity. He was getting annoyed, but I couldn’t shake the unsettling ache still sitting heavy in my core. If it was a memory that belonged to Beryl, then I wanted nothing to do with it. Like her magic, I took the annoying sensation and cast it into the abyss where I would never look for it again.

“Shouldn’t you be running your mother’s errands today?” I snapped.

With a soft growl on his lips, Holden palmed my head and gave me a gentle yet frustrated shake. It made me laugh as I swatted away his hand. We could never stay mad at each other for long. That was something I loved about our friendship. No matter what either one of us did, we could forgive each other in a heartbeat.

Besides, I hadn't done anything wrong. Was I running from something? Absolutely, but it wasn't something I wanted to let into my life. And I hoped that Holden could understand that.

"I asked Sawyer to take over this time," Holden said.

I cut him a sidelong glance. His mother was going to lose it, but Holden lifted his chin high and shoved his hands into his pockets like he was simply skipping school on a beautiful day. We weren't teenagers escaping stupid things anymore, though.

This was real life. This was his future as an Alpha.

I thought about bringing it up, about asking how his Pack would see him now that he'd eschewed his duties. It wasn't really my place, though. Besides, I was a princess who'd run off to a college at the edge of the state just so I could get a moment's peace to myself.

Who was I to argue?

People didn't look at Holden the way they looked at me, though. I was the reincarnation of a queen who many remembered. Meanwhile, Holden was the golden son of a beloved power couple. Our situation was wildly different.

The hair on the back of my neck started to prickle. I rubbed at the skin and glanced back. The streets were oddly empty, but it was still rather early in the day.

Holden put a hand to my back. I could feel his attention on my skin, but it was more like the comforting touch of a lover than anything else. The sensation I'd felt moments ago had been wildly different.

Shaking myself, I turned and pressed on, eager to reach Mom's café. At first, I wanted a sweet coffee to treat myself. Now, I craved one of the rainbow energy drinks that Vi liked to make.

When we pushed past the front door, Holden growled hungrily. The smell of butter and fresh baked bread in the air told me that someone was making grilled sandwiches today.

An intense craving for a ham and swiss on honey wheat bread made my stomach growl almost as loud as Holden.

“The prodigal children!” Vi announced, clapping her hands together.

In here, it was all too easy to slip into a nostalgic sense of comfort. Vi was one of the few people who didn't look at me like I might grow a second, cruel head. Perhaps it was because people looked at her with that same wary caution. Being the only daughter of Lucifer and the herald of the apocalypse had put a warning label on her forehead, though I heard that the apocalypse had already been averted.

Holden hugged his aunt. Though she was a tall woman, she still seemed small in his arms. The man really was huge. He had broad shoulders that were bound tight by muscles that made his shirt undulate like the waves of the sea when he moved.

Vi wiggled her brows when I looked away from Holden. My face warmed, though I wasn't quite sure why. He was my best friend and nothing else.

Holden and I placed our orders. We tried to pay for the food, but Vi wouldn't let us do anything. She was as stubborn as she was fiery. I knew that if I pushed too hard, she'd throw more food in for free just to be sassy, so I left it alone.

I went outside to one of the tables on the back pier and lifted my face to the breeze coming in off the water. Holden's phone vibrated. His deep scowl told me that it had to be his mother calling. When he excused himself, I sulked alone.

The feeling of being watched returned. It made my skin crawl. No matter where I looked, I couldn't see anyone else around. No one inside was even looking in my direction. I ran my hands up and down my arms to ease the goosebumps gathering along my skin.

Grabbing a wave of my arcana, I sent it out and touched the spirit of every living thing from here to the warehouses across the lake. My magic allowed me to feel every blade of grass swaying in the wind and every little fish lurking in the

lake—I chose to ignore the sleeping entity at the bottom because I highly doubted that was watching me while it dreamed.

Nothing hid in the grass. There was nothing else in the lake. No matter where I looked, I couldn't find the source of the uncomfortable feeling creeping up on me. I pulled my legs up into my chair like something might grab my ankles again. Already, I could feel the memory of its hand on my ankle.

Had Sawyer arrived just in time?

There was no way that it'd worn Sawyer's guise. If that'd been the case, then the thing pretending to be Sawyer wouldn't have called Holden.

The feeling of being watched sharpened. It made my heart race, my skin bead with sweat, and my breath turn shallow. I was now being hunted—don't ask why that was a familiar feeling, I grew up in the fae realms.

Lower lip trembling, I scanned my surroundings with wide eyes once again. The sound of my heart thundering filled my ears and drowned out every other sound.

A hand touched my shoulder. I yelped and threw myself to the side. Tumbling out of my chair, I couldn't stop the burst of magic that erupted from me. A massive root shot up from beneath the wood deck and slammed into a man. A familiar voice grunted in pain.

My head shot up. The feeling of being hunted vanished. I sucked in a gasp when I saw Holden half-embedded in the nearby wall. The door to the pier flew open, and Vi rushed out.

My eyes burned with unshed tears. I tried to rush to Holden, but Vi held out her arm to stop me. Her eyes flashed red in warning, her lips pursed tight. She'd gone into protection mode, only she was protecting Holden from *me*.

Hands over my mouth, I tried to say that I was sorry. I tried to explain, but my story was so full of holes from everything I still wanted to keep to myself. I soon realized it would be smarter to shut my mouth and stay quiet.

Holden groaned. "Don't worry. I'm used to it."

“Hol,” Vi said, her tone pleading as she continued to bar me from reaching him.

I’d gone and ruined it. One of the few people who hadn’t treated me like a ticking time-bomb now looked at me as though I might burn the café to the ground at any moment.

“Ivy, this isn’t like you.” Vi’s voice tried to reach me, but it seemed distant.

My magic churned inside me. It mingled with Beryl’s untouched power. I swallowed it down and felt it burn in the pit of my stomach, leaving me nauseous. I craved freedom, but there was nowhere to find it. No one would ever see me for who I was so long as Beryl’s magic kept making a mockery of me.

I hung my head in shame.

“See?” Holden said. “Everything is back to normal already.”

“That wall cannot fix itself the way you can,” Vi said. “What is going on? I know this isn’t some kind of prank game.”

Sheepishly, I sent my arcana into the wall. I couldn’t fix the paint, but I could repair the broken wood. It was the least I could do.

Holden picked himself up and put a hand on Vi’s shoulder. No words were exchanged, but I watched their shared looks. Vi searched her nephew’s face like she wanted to see a different answer and was sad to see what he’d chosen. Holden’s expression refused to budge. When he looked to me, he gave me a reassuring smile.

Eyes cast downward once more, I refused his smile. I couldn’t accept his nonchalance. This should have broken his trust. I didn’t deserve the forgiveness that he gave me so easily. There had to be some sort of consequence for the way I’d hurt him.

Holden didn’t seem to give a shit. He brushed himself off and came over to pick up my chair. Once it was upright, he gestured for me to sit. I knew he wouldn’t take a seat himself

until I sat, so I dropped myself unceremoniously into the chair—like the bag of trash that I felt like.

He palmed the top of my head affectionately again before taking his own seat.

Vi retreated. I knew she was on her way to get my mother. For a moment, I debated running. I could step in-between and fling myself anywhere in all the worlds. I could go wherever I pleased, anywhere but here.

Instead, I waited for my punishment.

Mom shoved the deck door open with a bump of her hip. She turned, both hands heavy with the trays of our food. She shoved her wild white curls out of the way after setting the trays down. When she cast a quick glance at the paint-less wall, my appetite died.

But Mom said nothing. She put both hands on her wide hips and changed the subject. “I heard your neighbors broke your window last night.”

Holden chuckled under his breath.

Mom pinched the bridge of her nose. “You have no idea how many times those windows have broken. I can’t seem to make them strong enough...And it’s usually Del breaking them, now that I think about it. I’m going to raise their rent. The elven king can afford to pay for it.”

This conversation reminded me of just how weird my life could be. At college, there were no elven kings or assassins living next door. There were no monsters sleeping at the bottom of the lake that also housed a fae court.

The whiplash between the two worlds almost broke me out of my gloom. But I peeked at Holden again and saw him rolling his shoulder. My throw must have really hurt him if he was still trying to work out the kinks.

What was wrong with me?

That wasn’t a question I really needed answered. I grabbed my energy drink from the table and took a small sip from it. The acidic drink burned the inside of my empty stomach, but I

didn't much care when my guilt seemed so much more painful.

"Ivy Rae," Mom said, her voice soft.

I turned away from her voice. I wasn't in the mood to be treated like a child, even if I was her daughter. The deep need to be somewhere where I could be myself and nothing else came over me.

Standing, I grabbed the wrapped sandwich on the tray and stepped away from the pier. I left it all behind and threw myself in-between with no real destination in mind. No one other than Arven would be able to find me if I didn't even know where I was going.

The worlds passed me by. I could feel them all grazing my skin, little whispers of music in faraway corners reaching my ears before vanishing altogether. For a moment, light hit my eyes and begged me to open them even though I knew I would see nothing in the darkness in-between.

Still, I gave in to the curiosity and peeked only to glimpse something I wasn't even sure was real. It was the tree, the same one I'd left in my living room. This one was larger. Impossibly larger. It reached past the sky and into the heavens around it. A golden glow emanated from the cracks in the white bark.

It was there and then gone. My feet touched solid ground, grass crunching underfoot. The light of the Seelie realm greeted me with warm affection. I collapsed onto a nearby bench. A canopy of flowering foliage acted as a small pavilion in the secret garden behind the castle.

There were only a handful of people who knew this place existed. Most of them should have been busy. Tal had work to do here. Mom and Dad were busy at the café. And Holden couldn't get here on his own.

Unwrapping my sandwich, a small note fell out. For a moment, my heart rocketed into my throat. I thought this had to be another threatening letter. Instead, it was a little *I love you* from Mom.

I swallowed hard.

“I can’t tell if I’m a threat to all of them,” I whispered to myself.

“Once upon a time, perhaps.” A female voice with an indistinct accent said. “But they certainly don’t see you that way now.”

Biting my lower lip, I swallowed my groan. There was one person I’d forgotten about when I settled in here.

I turned my gaze on the brownie named Hilda. The short woman barely came up to my thigh, but that didn’t make her any less bothersome. I knew what lurked inside her at all times. Only a brownie could become a boggart, and this one had terrorized me as a child.

She’d called it *training*. I called it a fucking nuisance.

“Can I eat my sandwich in peace?” I asked.

Hilda smiled and settled in across from me. If I’d had anything to throw, I would have chucked it at her smug face.

“Where’s that shadow of yours? The boy that the bitch wolf had. He’s always right behind you. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen the two of you apart.” Hilda cocked her head, that smug smile still stretching to the corners of her mouth.

I rolled my eyes. While I couldn’t argue with her name for Holden’s mother, I reminded her that Holden wasn’t my shadow. The man would become Lakesedge’s Pack Alpha someday. He wasn’t a shadow in anyone’s story.

It was a sad reminder that, someday, our paths would diverge. I’d already made a point to separate them by going to college. That hadn’t been my plan, of course. I’d wanted him to come with me, but Holden made the decision to stay here.

He knew his place in the world.

And I didn’t.

The sandwich should have tasted glorious. It had Black Forest ham, melted swiss, thin slices of apples, and Mom’s spicy mustard. It was sweet and spicy in all the best ways.

Instead, my thoughts made my stomach churn. It made the bread turn to ash on my tongue.

I wrapped the rest of it up and set it aside so I could glare at Hilda.

But the woman was gone.

“What?” I muttered under my breath as I twisted to scan my surroundings.

“What, indeed,” a male voice said.

I nearly jumped off the bench in surprise when Holden appeared before me. He crouched low, elbows on his knees, hands hanging between his legs as he looked up at me with those concerned eyes. Every look he gave me lately had that same pinched expression.

Hilda’s cackle wafted on the wind as she vanished completely. Though I wanted to punt the small woman for interfering in my business, I couldn’t help but acknowledge the way my muscles relaxed with Holden so close by. I wanted to lean my head on his shoulder and let his warm scent ease my heart, too.

He palmed my head, his thumb gently grazing my bare skin. “What was all that about?”

“I’m so sorry,” I said softly.

Holden shook his head. A wry smile reached his lips. “You know better than anyone that it’ll take a lot more than that to break me.”

“I shouldn’t have hurt you *at all*.” I clenched the brown paper wrapper in my hand and heard it crinkle. “And before you say *it’s okay because you don’t have control*, I feel like that’s a problem, too.”

Is that what I was? Just a problem?

“If you think you could ever be a problem to me, then you’re wildly wrong.” His hand slid down to cup my cheek.

It was affectionate, and I wanted to cling to his hand. We weren’t a couple, though. The way my heart stretched and

ached for someone to look at me this tenderly nearly broke me. In this moment, I knew that no one else would be able to handle me. My magic would always break things, from people to relationships.

Holden said nothing. He stood and gestured for me to move over on the bench so he could sit with me. We sat there, me sipping my drink while he ate his steak sandwich, in silence. Holden's leg brushed up against mine, and when I expected him to move it away, he let it linger. I leaned into him and sighed, though I wasn't sure if it was a sound of relief or exhaustion.

He'd always been the rock in my life. I would miss him when we inevitably had to part ways. He would go on to become a Pack Alpha with a mate who would want to bear his heirs—the thought made my stomach burn with rage...or was that jealousy?

There was no time like the present, though. If this was all I had left with Holden, then I would have to take advantage of it. He wanted to help me, and of all the people in my life, I could trust him.

“The other night, when I came home, there was a package on my doorstep.” I picked at the rim of my cup lid because I couldn't quite look him in the eye.

Perhaps it was because I wasn't sure what I'd seen. I couldn't even tell if it was real or not. Every time I turned around, my magic made a mess of things again. I saw illusions around every corner lately.

But Holden didn't ask if my magic was to blame. He growled protectively, likely because he heard the tremble of fear I was trying to keep shoved down.

“The package had a letter...someone wants me to know that they're coming to reclaim something that was stolen before I was even born.” I scowled at the flowers turning red around my feet. “That tree in my living room...that's the letter. I might have turned it into a plant because I was scared, but that's not the point. The point is that it became that weird tree.”

The same weird tree that I saw while stepping in-between. Though, I didn't mention that. I didn't fully understand what that meant yet. It could have been nothing, it could have been a dream—I knew that my fae arcana had a lot to do with dreams, as did Mom's.

“Does this have anything to do with why you were running down the street late at night?” Holden asked, that growl still rumbling in his chest.

I hung my head. “Yes.”

At least, I thought it did. That fae climbing in through my window had been real...right? It hadn't been an illusion created by my own uncontrollable magic? There was no way that I could really prove that by myself. I would have to ask for help, but if it was an illusion and the others found out that I was losing my mind terrorizing myself, I would never recover from the embarrassment.

The magical outbursts never really hurt *me*. If this guy was an illusion, then I'd be able to ignore him, and nothing would happen.

Right?

“Point me in their direction,” Holden snarled. “I'll fix it for you.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “You didn't even ask if I have the thing they're looking for.”

Holden gave a half-shrug. “I don't care if you do or not. This person is harassing you, and that's not how anyone should be treated.”

My heart sank ever so slightly. I wasn't sure what I'd expected. I knew Holden well enough to understand that he liked to be helpful. It was as if he was practicing for his future role. He wanted to be there for everyone. But hearing it made me realize I wasn't as special as I wanted to be.

Holden would help me because that was the right thing to do, not because he needed to know I was safe.

My thoughts turned in on themselves until I finally sighed and pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes. Here, in the Seelie realm, I was safe. I could stay here until it was time to return to college, and then everything would be all right. Nothing bad could happen.

But I wanted to feel the sand of my favorite beach between my toes. I wanted to careen down back roads with Holden and feel the wind in my hair. We had so little time left, and I wanted to make the best of it.

“Do you want me to stay with you tonight?” Holden asked.

My tongue turned thick in my mouth. It fumbled words, turning anything I tried to say into nonsense. I knew it was because I didn’t even know what I wanted. How could I speak if I didn’t know what was going on?

Finally, I sighed and shook my head.

Holden was silent for several heartbeats. Finally, he turned his head away. I wanted to know what was going on behind those eyes. If I looked, I knew that I’d be able to read every thought of his as each one crossed his face. We’d known each other too long.

But I gave him his space and let him keep his thoughts to himself since he’d turned away.

Of course, Holden had to leave. Ness called in a flaming rage that he hadn't been the one to greet the newcomers at the airport. In my opinion, Sawyer was much more fitted for the job since he had the charisma of a cult leader with no motivation. Ness just wanted Holden and I to be separated.

I sat with my legs crossed in front of the new window that Dad had come to install. It'd taken every last bit of energy I had left in me to get him to leave. He'd stayed and tried to convince me to move back home. The man even tried to get me to quit college.

A part of me wanted to.

I wanted to give up this stupid self-imposed mission. The classes I took meant so little to me that I spaced out during the lectures. The faces around me turned into a blur. I didn't really know anyone there. The loneliness that it conjured seemed unbearable, a weight that wouldn't even let me out of bed most days.

Back home, there were more reasons to get up and out, even if everyone looked at me like I was an active threat.

The conundrum made me groan loudly. I pressed my hands to my face and kicked at the air. Something brushed my foot and made me shriek. My heart leapt into my throat as I rolled onto my hands and knees to scurry away.

When I glanced up, I realized I'd kicked a hanging flower. It was a remnant of the other day when my arcana had an

outburst. There was nothing in the room with me. Nothing weird touched my foot.

I ripped my pillow up and covered my head with it so I could scream into my mattress.

“Is the princess having a meltdown?” A scratchy voice, like the rasp of a tree branch against my window in the middle of the night, asked.

I shot upright. My blood turned to ice, making my muscles stiff as I craned my neck to look behind me. There shouldn't have been anyone else in the room with me. When I'd last checked, I'd been alone.

Now the smell of rot curled between the flowers hanging from my ceiling. My breath came short as fear and disgust gripped my lungs.

He lurked in the doorway. His form seemed human but... wrong. Knees bent in a crouch, they came up to his shoulders. His elbows nearly grazed the ground before he stretched a hand towards me.

Without thinking, I sent out a bit of my arcana and grabbed the vines hanging from my ceiling. I turned them into thick ropes and sent them flying in his direction. They hit empty air. One moment he was in the doorway, the next he crouched at the foot of my bed.

I scrambled to the head of the bed and pressed my back to the wall. My chest heaved at the sight of his massive eyes, huge in his skeletal face. A human smile stretched too wide and revealed a second and third row of teeth.

“Evening, Ivy Rae of the Seelie Court.” He bent his head, but that expression never changed. It remained too wide, too human.

I licked my lips nervously. My tongue seemed too thick again. Would I trip over my words when I spoke?

“Do you know who you're dealing with? Hellfire will literally rain down on your head if you so much as touch a hair on mine.” I tried to be confident, but I could feel cold fear overtaking my mind.

He lifted a hand and wagged a finger that had one too many knuckles. “That is not how this will work. I am well within my rights to take back what was once mine.”

“I don’t have anything that belongs to you!” What would he do if I kicked him? Would my foot go through his chest?

I looked down at my bare foot and decided against it. If I’d had a boot or a sneaker on, then I might have tried. Instead, I reached for the vines hanging above. This time, I pulled thorns to the surface as I slowly brought them down.

The gaunt-faced fae man lifted a bemused brow. He’d noticed what I was doing, and his expression openly told me he wasn’t afraid of my magic.

He should be. He should cower in terror at my power.

The thought raced through the forefront of my mind and brought a wave of hot rage with it that melted away the fear, but only for a heartbeat before I quickly shoved it back. I didn’t want to be that person. I wasn’t *her*.

“If this is about Beryl, I don’t know what she stole from you, but I don’t have it anymore. That’s not me.” The vines curled behind me, like snakes ready to strike at the first hint of aggression.

His bemused look turned curious. He pressed his lips together and cocked his head as his gaze narrowed. “I do not know why you speak of the Blood Queen. My presence here has nothing to do with my fallen regent. Do I look like the kind of man to care who sits upon a throne far away from my own domain? Absolutely not.”

Okay, then what did he want? The man was vague and creepy, and I was tired of his presence in my apartment.

If this had nothing to do with Beryl, then I really had no idea what to do in this situation. I’d assumed that she’d stolen something from him, and he thought to get it back through me. I was at a loss for once.

“Maybe if you tell me what you’re looking for, I’ll tell you if I have it or not? That sound good?” I asked, trying to hide the shake in my voice.

The vines behind me trembled like they might strike at any moment.

The man smiled demurely, his eyes creasing with wild delight as he put one hand on the mattress and leaned forward to reach out with the other. He tapped one long finger against my chest, right where my heart would be.

“I want your magic.”

I lashed out with the vines. They should have struck home, but instead they went through his form again. The man vanished, leaving behind only the reek of his previous presence.

I looked everywhere as I shoved my back to the wall again. The room was empty save for the swaying flowers hanging above. Cautiously, I stepped off the bed and padded out into the living room. The window was still in one piece, meaning the fae man had stepped into my home without having to break anything—not even a ward.

Was he even real? Was I losing my grasp on reality? The strain of having nowhere to go could have finally broken me.

Only the folded corners of a small paper note on the edge of the bed remained as evidence of the fae—aside from the stink. I reached towards it and hesitated. My fingers trembled, the tips of them tingling from the adrenaline still pumping through my veins.

This was *real*.

And it had nothing to do with Beryl.

The fae had seemed confused when I mentioned her. He'd looked at me as if I'd completely gone off the rails. But what he wanted from me was my magic. I didn't see how those two things weren't one and the same. In my mind, they had to be. The bubble of power behind my sternum belonged to Beryl from another life.

Was that not what he wanted?

I carefully lifted and unfolded the note. It was the same letter from before, only now there was a deadline at the end. If

I did not deliver what he wanted by the end of the summer, he would take it by force.

How generous of him.

Unable to stay here alone any longer, I threw myself in-between. I ran to the only place I knew I would find comfort and safety.

Holden

WELL, today hadn't gone quite as well as I would have liked. The Pack didn't care that I'd eschewed my duties. The job had been done, and no one cared who had gotten it done—except for my mother.

I was starting to think she only cared because I'd spent the day with Ivy. This helicopter behavior started the minute Ivy returned from college for the summer. Otherwise, she left me alone to my own devices because I wasn't a Pack Alpha yet. Now, all of a sudden, she needed me to hurry up and learn how to be responsible for my fellow shifters.

I stared at the photo on the shelf of my childhood bedroom. I wasn't sure what'd brought me up here save for the need to escape my mother's ranting for a moment. The faces in the photo were fresh faced, without a care in the world. Ivy smiled and held up her hands to ward off a water balloon that I'd thrown at her. I was in the background, grinning like an idiot. Ivy's form blurred ever so slightly in the photo.

I recalled that day, one of my birthday parties as a kid. Ivy had used her fae magic to step in-between and avoid the water balloon. It was what'd made her a good target. She'd been hard to hit, and I'd been a determined little asshole of a child.

I'd gotten her with one eventually. It'd been at the end of the day, when she'd been least expecting it. I'd brought the water balloon down over her head. There were no photos of that because Ivy's magic had exploded shortly after. It'd

turned the picnic table bearing my birthday cake into a massive tree.

That'd been the first day that I'd seen our parents fight. Mom had been nothing but supportive of Ivy and her family until that outburst, as if it'd reminded Mom of something.

A small scratch at the window diverted my attention. Curious, I set the photo down and turned to peer at the dark glass holding back the night. A familiar face smiled up at me wearily like we were teens sneaking around all over again.

Ivy crouched on her hands and knees on the roof outside until I opened the window and let her tumble in. Instinctively, I reached to catch her before she could make a loud thud on the floor. A feeling of nostalgia came over me again, reminding me of all the sleepovers we'd had without alerting either of our parents. We easily slipped into our old ways, sneaking around just to get a little more time together.

I turned and gently set Ivy down onto my bed, which made the beast within me rise with a greedy growl. She was no longer the awkward teenager I once knew. Here was a full-grown woman in my bed, her knees gathered beneath her as she looked up at me with eyes full of need—the need to be safe.

Crouching in front of her, I fought back my angry beast ready to take on whoever had frightened her again. We both knew the answer: the thing hunting her had returned again.

“Are you okay?” was about all I could manage to get past my growling dragon as it fought valiantly to get out and hunt down the creature bothering her.

That wouldn't help in this situation. Right now, Ivy needed me here with her. She wouldn't have come to my window otherwise.

She looked around, brow furrowing as she took in my childhood bedroom. While it was definitely familiar since nothing had changed in here since we'd been kids, I figured it probably wasn't where she was expecting to land.

I sighed. “I needed a moment to myself, so I came upstairs.”

A look of guilt crossed her face. “Am I interrupting something? Do you think my presence will make matters worse?”

“Yes, but I don’t care.” My beast wanted her, it wanted to wrap her in our arms and never let go. I needed her warm skin against mine so badly that if she left, I might not be able to hold back my beast.

She reached for my old pillow and pulled it to her chest. As I watched her curl in on herself, I lost the fight with my dragon. It didn’t tear out of me and go on a bloody hunt across the city, though. The beast knew what was necessary right now. It pushed me to climb over her and curl up behind her so that she could have someone strong to burrow into.

For the first time in months, the beast released its accursed pressure on my chest. My heart thumped a wild beat that I hoped she couldn’t hear. This wasn’t love, but it was peace. I savored every second of it as I inhaled the scent of her hair.

Rearing back, I nearly gagged at the smell clinging to her. It stank of rotting things, of smoke and herbs, and...of stinky feet.

“What the hell did you roll in before coming here?” I asked, cringing at the scent.

Ivy rammed an elbow into my ribs. I grunted and winced. She’d always been good with those sharp elbows, and my soft internal organs cowered in fear before her.

“He came,” she said quietly.

The words didn’t make any sense. At first, my beast snarled and gnashed its teeth because it thought she meant a man had touched her. Then I slowly realized that she meant someone had paid her a visit, likely the fae that was hunting her.

I blushed at my beast’s unruly thoughts, thankful that not only was her back to me so she couldn’t see my shame but that she couldn’t read my lustful thoughts. This was my best

friend. I knew that I needed to lie with someone or else my beast would turn me inside out, but I wouldn't use Ivy like that.

She produced a note between her fingers that she let fall to the bed. I didn't reach for it because the same putrid smell came from the paper, and I didn't want to get it on my hands. If anything, had I been home, I would have tossed Ivy in the shower and wrapped her in a blanket on the couch.

Instead, we were whispering in my parents' home where my options were much more limited because I wasn't about to involve anyone else here.

"Did he harm you?" I asked, pulling her tighter to my chest.

She was silent for a long while, so long that I began to fear she was concocting a lie. The way she squeezed the arm I had wrapped around her as she shook her head comforted me. That squeeze told me that her silent response was truthful. Though she was scared, the fae hadn't harmed her.

"I'll hunt it for you," I offered, whispering into her hair. "I have its scent. I can make sure that it never bothers you again."

She meant everything to me. As the only person able to grant me peace, as the oldest friend in my life, she'd become my treasure. It was a dangerous thought as I knew Treasure Sickness ran in the family, but I couldn't help it. If anything happened to her, I would gladly let the sickness overrun my mind.

It would be better than living a day in a world where Ivy didn't exist.

Ivy breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth, like she was trying to ease the hammer of her own heart. I ran my thumb along her arm to remind her that she wasn't alone.

While my beast raged at the evidence of her fear, a part of me was oddly happy. I hated the feeling and tried to shove it to the side, but it refused to relent. Happiness should not have

come as a product of tonight, but the woman in my arms and the fact that she'd come to me in her time of need pleased me.

What kind of a man was I that I found pleasure in my friend's horror? She'd been shaken when she climbed in through my window. I had no right feeling such a way when she needed my righteous anger and strong hand instead.

My lip curled. I was thankful she couldn't see my face.

Her fear must have slipped away, though. She soon started to snore softly in my arms. We should have left and gone back to my trailer outside of town. It seemed we would have to sleep here for the night, instead.

It made me wonder if she'd heard my declaration at all. Whether or not she heard me changed little. When she left for the day tomorrow, I would take this scent I'd memorized, and I would go on a hunt for this thing bothering her.

“F uck!”

I shot upright, the word spilling out of my mouth before I remembered where I’d fallen asleep the night before. Throwing myself from the bed, I bit my lip in the process. If Ness caught me in her son’s old room, she would blow a gasket, and everyone would have to pay the price.

But the floor I landed on wasn’t quite right. Touching my fingers to my bloody lip, I looked around. My heart settled into an erratic beat while my mind tried to make sense of where I was.

Somehow, in my sleep, I must have dragged myself home because this was my bed, my floor, my apartment. I touched the sheets to make sure they were real and managed to get blood on them in the process.

“I hope this is a dream because that stain is going to be so hard to get out,” I mumbled to myself as my stomach turned in a massive wave.

Holden stirred. I startled and leapt to my feet. The man had thrown off his shirt and his pants at some point in the night. Holden stretched his arms over his head and put his chiseled shifter body on display for me. The sight scrambled my brains all over again.

This has to be a dream, I thought.

My attention slid down the lines of his chest, to the V that beckoned me past the hem of his boxers. I knew that I should

have looked away. This was my best friend. We'd known each other for so long this definitely wasn't the first time I'd seen him nearly naked.

However, it was the first time that the sight of him brought searing flames of need through my body. Warmth gathered between my legs as I thought of climbing atop him.

"Your lip," he said.

The words didn't register right away. My hot blood overwhelmed my good senses, making me stare at him blankly for several heartbeats. Finally, the gears began to turn again, and I touched my chin to find it covered in more blood.

With a curse on my tongue, I shot to my feet and rushed into the bathroom. The reflection in the mirror looked as though I'd taken a bite out of a living animal. My vision turned red, and the world swam.

I wrinkled my nose and tried to shove the wave of nausea back, but it crashed over me and turned the world black. The only thing I could see through the darkness behind my eyelids was the gleaming red shape of the blood on my own chin.

When I woke, there was no pain. I sat upright, expecting an ache in my neck or a throb in my skull. Seeing Holden at my feet, a worried look across his face, told me that he'd managed to catch me before I hit the ground. I fell back, relieved and grateful.

"You need to teach your brother to move that fast," I said to the ceiling.

I expected a chuckle from Holden, but I received a growl instead as if the mention of his brother was forbidden now. Craning my neck, I watched Holden get up and dump a towel into the trash. A glimpse of red on the towel before it vanished made me look away so fast that I nearly gave myself whiplash.

Holden returned, lifted me, and placed me in his lap as he sat. Together, we sank into the couch cushions. Last time we'd sat like this in my apartment, Del and her husband had burst through my window.

I'd wanted a simple summer vacation. Instead, I'd somehow stumbled into the wildest time of my life, and that was saying something as someone who grew up in the fae realms.

Holden stroked my hair. "We should visit someone who might be able to tell us more about this fae bothering you."

I groaned. The last thing I wanted to do was ask my parents for help. Dad would drag me kicking and screaming back to the Seelie castle. While I wasn't sure I wanted to go back to college, I definitely didn't want to be locked up in a castle.

I just wanted to find where I belonged. There was nothing wrong with that. Was there?

Another part of me wanted to ignore the letter and the fae delivering it. If I could hold out until the end of summer, then I could head back to college and put enough distance between myself and the fae until he forgot all about this mix up.

The idea crumbled upon fruition as I recalled the past two decades the fae had been waiting to come reclaim what he thought had been stolen from him. He wasn't going to forget about it after two semesters.

Groaning, I rammed the heels of my palms into my eyes so hard I thought it might bruise. A gentle whisper of a touch at my lip caught me off guard. My hands fell away so I could see Holden's gaze on my busted lip, his thumb hovering over the broken skin.

My breath hitched. The world closed in around us. A tight need in my lower stomach brought ideas—ones I'd tried to hush throughout our friendship—to the surface of my mind.

I knew where I belonged. I'd been right where I needed to be this whole time, with him.

But that wasn't true. I touched his wrist in a silent plea for him to stop. He cleared his throat loudly and looked away. With a curt nod, he moved on without saying anything about what'd just happened.

My own heart raced on the power of the wild thoughts rushing through my mind. My breath remained shallow until I threw myself off the couch and away from him.

“Who...” My voice cracked, strained from the fight going on inside me. I coughed. “Who can we ask for help? Everyone in our lives has already survived some sort of apocalyptic event. Either they’ll blow this out of proportion or lock me away in a tower. Maybe even both!”

I thought back to everyone we’d come into contact with over the past few days. Both Dad and Aunt Vi seemed like the kind of people who would go overboard, for different reasons. I knew that I could go to my Mom; she was the kind of person who always left the door open.

There was something demeaning about running to her. I was an adult, and I wanted to be treated like one. Living in the shadow of four infamous women and their mates kind of left me out in the cold. I didn’t want them to be the ones to solve all my problems—because one of them was a big problem, *cough cough Holden’s mother*.

There had to be someone who knew a lot about the realm of the fae, on the sides of both Seelie and Unseelie. I doubted that creepy *Slenderman* motherfucker was a Seelie fae. If he was, then I was a cartoon duck with a lisp.

“I know who we can talk to,” I said, though my voice dropped with disappointment.

Holden seemed ready to do whatever I asked. He gave no argument even though I suggested calling on my childhood nemesis. It wasn’t like Hilda hated me. She just saw me as a nuisance until I’d gotten old enough to act like an adult instead of a child. It’d taken me a long time to realize that—not that it was any excuse for her behavior.

Holden’s gaze dropped to my lip again. “Can we see your mother and have her fix that first?”

“And what? Tell her I threw myself out of bed because I got spooked when I woke up next to you? There will be way too many questions. They’re going to assume things that aren’t

true, and I don't need your mom breathing down the back of my neck any more than she already is."

A lot came out all at once. I pressed my lips shut and snuck a worried glance in Holden's direction. If he was offended by what I'd said, he showed no sign of it. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Holden didn't say anything for a while, though. His gaze remained averted like he had something on his mind that he didn't want to express. Was he hiding his disgust at the idea of us as a couple? If so, that would sting more than a little, I realized.

I turned away and braced myself against the disappointment that I didn't expect to feel today. It was bad enough I'd panicked and thrown myself out of bed already. Adding this revelation about my feelings to the pile of shit to work through later didn't really leave me feeling refreshed. In fact, my feet seemed heavier now.

Shaking myself, I went to the fridge and grabbed a canned coffee drink. They weren't as good as the drinks made at Mom's café, but I hated making my own coffee, and this was so much more convenient. Cracking it open, I chugged several gulps.

It didn't change anything. I didn't know what I'd been expecting. I wasn't the sort to drink alcohol, so I was treating this silly little coffee drink like it would blur my thoughts and ease the tightness in my chest the way a cocktail might. That's not how any of this worked.

"Let's go find Hilda." I screwed the cap back onto my drink, perhaps a little too tightly.

Holden gave a silent nod and extended his hand for me to take it. He knew we'd be using my travel abilities. It wasn't like his truck was waiting outside after I'd teleported us clear across Lakesedge in the middle of the night.

I reached inside myself for my power and tried to avoid the burning ball of Beryl's magic in the process. The seed of

power tried to reach out and touch me, but I recoiled before it could make contact.

Unfortunately, that recoil happened mid-step. One moment, we were in my apartment, the next we tumbled through a void that screamed like a windstorm around us. My hair flew in all directions as the air howled. Holden, with his grip on my hand, pulled me into his chest and wrapped himself around me like the world might end if I got even one more scratch.

I clung to him until we hit ground. The impact wasn't as rough as I expected, but that could have been because Holden took the brunt of it.

Lifting my head, I cracked open an eye and peered around nervously.

“Are you okay?” Holden asked, speaking for the first time in a few minutes.

My heart warmed when he looked down at me with the light of his beast in his eyes and his brows arched so gently. My words failed me as my heart thumped against the inside of my sternum. All I could do was nod.

Holden unfolded himself from around me and stood so he could offer me a hand up. On my feet, I took stock of our surroundings. Though the forest around us was grim and filled with shadows, it was familiar at the same time. I cocked my head, confused.

“Why did we end up in Dad's domain?” Turning, I could see the top of Dad's lodge over the trees.

Though I'd meant to step in-between to reach Hilda, we'd somehow stumbled into a fae domain. Last time I'd tried to reach a person without knowing their whereabouts, I'd landed on the roof outside Holden's childhood bedroom. Perhaps something similar had happened.

“This place feels like a haunted ride at a kid's amusement park,” Holden said, stepping up beside me. “It looks scary on the surface, but there's no real sense of dread or tension. I

should be afraid, but it's like I know nothing is going to jump out and attack us.”

“Boo!” Hilda shouted, appearing out of nowhere.

Both Holden and I gave her an unimpressed stare. Hilda floated in the air before us, rocking back so she could cross her arms over her chest and pout at her failed jump-scare.

“I...I just said I'm not afraid.” Holden cocked his head.

Hilda rolled her eyes, sighed, and asked, “What are the two of you doing here? You don't come to your dear old Dad's place that often. Last time you were here, I scared you so badly you pissed your pretty little dress.”

I curled my fingers into fists when she unlocked the memory that I'd buried so deep that it should have been a fossil by now.

Holden growled like he could undo the torment that Hilda had wrought fifteen years ago.

I grabbed the floating woman out of the air and yanked her to me. “Hey, could you tell me what you know about a really creepy Unseelie fae with long limbs and a weird smile? Consider it compensation for your shitty behavior in the past. I would appreciate it, thanks.”

Hilda scowled at me, not like she was mad but like she was annoyed that she couldn't be a nuisance any longer. Then her expression shifted in thought. I watched the gears behind her eyes turn as she mentally flipped through every fae she'd ever met.

That was one thing about Hilda that I appreciated. Not only was she dedicated to the Seelie court, but she'd been around long enough to know a little bit about everything, and she was more than willing to share it with us.

Hilda lifted a curious brow when her mental catalog landed on someone who might fit that bill. I watched the recognition light up her eyes like a little lightbulb going off over her head.

“There was a night, before either of you were born, that I took Cerri and her friend—ah, what was her name? The

gloomy one who has a couple of divine beings in her back pocket? Anyway, I took them into the Goblin Market. You described a fellow that sets up shop in a dark corner there. And when I say dark, I mean the main stalls already sell souls. There are worse things in the shadows in a place like that.”

“That’s why he smelled a bit like feet,” Holden muttered under his breath. “*Goblins.*”

Both Hilda and I turned to stare at him like he’d just said *aliens* like a pseudoscientist who thinks all the wonders of the world were built by extraterrestrials.

“Don’t look at me like that.” He scowled at us. “They smell like feet. Just because your nose isn’t as good as mine doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

“That’s a bit biased,” I said, challenging his assumption that *all* goblins smelled like feet.

Hilda shook her head. “No, he’s right. Little shits hate to wear shoes. They come stomping all over my clean floors, leaving their stink everywhere.”

I nearly threw my hands up in defeat.

Hilda turned to me. “I don’t recommend you go sniffing around the Goblin Market, though. The last time a Seelie princess turned up at one, it caused an uproar across the whole market.”

My jaw nearly hit the ground. “Mom went to a Goblin Market?”

Hilda’s face drained of all color. She scowled and shook her head. “I’ve said too much. Go talk to your mother if you want to learn anything more. I have some wood floor to polish and some Sluagh spirits to pester. Now, if you don’t mind...”

Like that, Hilda vanished before I could press for more information. If I ran to Dad’s lodge, I might have been able to track her down, but she would have a bucket of soap and polish to throw at me. I wasn’t up for that kind of battle. Besides, a pissed off Brownie would become a Boggart if I pushed too hard, and those were scarier than Dad’s Sluagh spirits.

“Should we talk to your mother?” Holden asked hopefully.

I shook my head. This was my problem, and I would solve it on my own. Mom would call a court meeting and have someone fix this for me. She would give me that look, the one that knew where I’d come from. It was the same one Ness had, even if it was softer and filled with a mother’s love.

It still stung.

“I can do this on my own.”

My next stop was outside of Lakesedge. It was outside of my county entirely.

Mom had been like one of the four horsewomen of change in Lakesedge. If Ness was War, then that made Addie the horsewoman of death—no, don't ask me who was famine or pestilence, I didn't want to assign either to Mom or Aunt Vi. My analogy had holes in it, but Addie still kind of gave me the creeps.

Holden stood right behind me. He stood so close, in fact, that if I took even half a step back, I'd bump into his chest. His warmth radiated across my back and left a sense of ease flowing through me. It gave me the will to lift my hand and knock on Addie's front door.

Of course, her creepier husband answered the door. The man seemed to have permanent dark circles under his eyes. The only time they ever went away was when he was around Addie, as if she gave him life. Maybe she did. Maybe her husband was some sort of undead guy.

I didn't want to think about it.

“Ah...” I found myself at a sudden loss for words.

Maddox's brow fell into a deep scowl. “Your lip. Are you okay?”

Of course, Maddox's attention immediately flicked to the shifter standing a little too closely to me. When Holden growled in response, the air sparked with unspent electricity. I

twisted my neck to give Holden a *look*, to which he replied with an abashed hand at the back of his head.

Maddox's tight shoulders relaxed. I wasn't sure what he'd learned from that short exchange that put his concerns to rest, but I was grateful for it, nonetheless. Holden wasn't the one hurting me.

I was.

Okay, that sounded bad even to me.

"Is Addie home? I was wondering if I could ask her a few questions...about Mom. I'm...putting together a gift." It was a bold-faced lie, and Maddox probably knew it.

The way he eyed me yet said nothing made me wonder what kind of things Mom and her friends had gotten up to back in the day for this man to look more bemused than anything. I knew they'd all overturned Lakesedge and made it a better place, but it was difficult to imagine any of them as wild and rebellious—except for Aunt Vi, really.

"Come on inside. I think Addie just made some sort of dip...casserole...thing." Maddox stepped aside to let us in.

Holden

THE DETECTIVE'S gaze never left me. My beast formed a tight knot between my shoulder blades that I couldn't escape no matter how I rolled my shoulders or straightened my spine. When the man looked at me, a wave of unsettling magic washed over me. I could feel the hairs on my arms stand on end as this aura pulled at my skin.

So, when Ivy slipped into the kitchen to talk to Addie, I hung back and waited for Maddox to say something.

This wasn't our first meeting. Maddox was officially part of my Pack, even though he lived way out here in the Adirondacks. I'd known this man all my life, and yet he watched me like I'd become someone altogether new.

I swallowed. “You can see it. Can’t you?”

Maddox tongued one of his canines as he put his hands in his pockets, spread his feet, and sized me up. The man wasn’t going to attack. He would hold his ground if I did, though. That said enough.

Hanging my head, I said, “I’m not a threat.”

Maddox let out a bitter laugh. “That’s a lie son, but I know there’s a caveat to that. Only to those who threaten *her*. Right?”

I sucked my teeth as I stared at the ground. Why was I averting my gaze if I was the more dominant of the two shifters? Because I didn’t want him to see just how bright the beast could be in my eyes. Maddox was right, and I hated him for that.

I should have known that the detective would see right through me. He would take one look at me and read everything that I’d kept hidden from my family. While it came as no surprise, it was frustrating to no end.

After this, he would go and tell Dad. I’d let Sawyer take a lot of heat lately. Sawyer was the fun loving, free spirited son of an Alpha shifter while I kept my head down and pretended to be the dutiful heir that everyone wanted me to be.

Perhaps it was time to let Sawyer fly under the radar. I could take Dad’s disappointment so long as I had Ivy to turn to at the end of the day. While I had no mate, I still had the company of my best friend, and that seemed to be enough for the beast.

For now.

I feared what might happen when she went back to school. Would my beast be this happy with any other woman, though? I’d wondered that a number of times. There was no one else in this world that I knew better than Ivy Rae, and I couldn’t imagine knowing anyone else as well. A mate bond might tie me to a woman, but it wouldn’t let me in on all the subtle gestures she used or the way her mouth curled when she lied.

“So long as she’s around, I’m fine,” I said. “I don’t know what I’ll be like after she leaves, but I’ll figure it out. I don’t plan on being a burden to the Pack.”

Maddox made a *pfft* sound. “You and I both know your father could never treat anyone like a burden. That man has one driving force in mind and that is to save the world and every poor soul in it. He would take up Thor’s job down in Tennessee if it weren’t for your mother. Why do you think he has all the big lizard shifters sent up here? That man has already rehabilitated a wolf between life and death. He can save anyone.”

I didn’t want to be saved, least of all by my father. It felt like a weakness. I knew how to fix myself, I just needed time. There was no need for anyone else to intervene. What kind of man would I be if someone else had to swing into my life to rescue me from myself? Not the kind of man set to step into a leadership role.

Maddox’s attention slid to the kitchen where the two women gathered. Something crossed his mind, but it was hidden behind the permanent shadows that lived over his eyes. Without another word, he sighed, came over to clap me on the shoulder, and pushed into the kitchen to stand by his mate.

Left alone in the living room, I stared in the direction he’d gone and wondered what that could have meant. My dragon moved restlessly, ready to tear into the strange wolf threatening to out it to my father. Ivy stepped into view, and the beast settled as if hypnotized by the sight of her.

For now, I was safe. I would deal with this madness when she left. Until then, I would enjoy the company of my best friend, and I would help her with this thing hunting her.

No matter where I went or what I did, I lived in the shadow of something that happened before I was even born. I chewed on my lower lip while Addie mentally sorted through what she thought was appropriate to tell me. I knew the look because they all wore it whenever I asked questions.

Mom, Ness, Aunt Vi, and Addie all shared a single braincell sometimes. Couldn't they see me screaming for my own story? All I wanted was to be a person apart from whatever they did. Even Holden had his own path to walk. He would become a leader in his own right, and he was working towards it every day.

I was just the ghost of Queen Beryl, an evil bitch who'd hurt almost everyone I knew.

"You really should ask your mother about this," Addie said without meeting my eyes.

When she pushed a plate of little sandwiches towards me, I fought back the urge to flip it in her face. Instead, I remained cool and calm and *oh my god, I'm going to lose my mind.*

"If Mom wanted to tell me, she would have done so already. That's why I'm here," I pleaded.

Addie gave me a tight smile as if to say *I told you so.* "If she hasn't told you, then what makes you think I have any right to? I'm not going to go behind my friend's back, least of all Cerridwen's. She would introduce me to my own Reaper."

All I wanted to do was tell Addie that I was being hunted by something from the Goblin Market. I knew that if I did, she would run and tell Mom who would then tell Dad, and I would never see the light of the mortal realm ever again. He'd shove me into a tower like a fairy tale princess just so I'd be safe.

Couldn't they see that I just wanted to do this on my own?

I ran my hands down my face. It wasn't like I'd told anyone other than Holden what was happening. I kept it to myself because I knew how everyone would react. If a part of Beryl's past had come to collect a debt she owed, they would stop seeing me and start seeing Beryl again. It was bad enough that Ness saw Beryl whenever she looked at me.

Holden touched my shoulder. His presence dragged me out of the murky thoughts trying to drown me. My frustration untangled and lost its static charge as if he took it into himself.

Lifting my gaze, I met Addie's eyes and said, "Then I'll go to the Goblin Market by myself."

Her lips parted. She looked as though she had something to say, but it got stuck in her throat. Finally, she sighed, dropped her chin, and shook her head. To my surprise, a laugh escaped her.

"You're just like we were. We stumbled into so many traps and pitfalls because we kept charging headfirst into everything."

A scowl tried to twist my lips. "Then why won't you help me?"

The bubble of magic that I kept shoved down started to vibrate. It was getting too large and needed to unleash arcana before it spilled over and erupted in the house. I went ramrod straight and glanced at Holden.

This conversation and the frustration of it all was too much. My emotions added fuel to the flame that was the untapped magic in my chest. If I wasn't careful, it would blow up and take Addie's house with it. I would feel awful if I did irreparable damage to her and her husband.

Ducking my head, I turned to face Holden and took his hand. Right before I turned my back to Addie, I thought I saw a spark of recognition in her eyes. Her lips parted ever so slightly. I couldn't stay and hear her tell me no again, though.

"Ivy, wait!" Addie called out.

I stepped in-between and reappeared in my apartment once again. The tiny jungle of a home was still overrun with plant life. The air was thick and humid, but it smelled of home in a way that I couldn't describe.

Halfway to the couch, I paused. I stared at the bedroom door in the far corner and wondered if the fae man would come back. Would he climb onto my bed while I slept? Would he reach into my chest and take whatever it was he thought Beryl had stolen from him?

Shuddering, I wrapped my arms around myself. I stood in the middle of the room, unable to force myself any further. Holden came over, lifted me off my feet, and carried me to the couch where he sat with me in his lap.

This felt like something couples would do. It screamed *more than friends*, but I brushed it off. Holden and I had known each other so long that our boundaries with one another blurred into areas beyond friendship without the romantic ties—ties that I found myself yearning for.

Before those thoughts could get me hurt, I threw myself off Holden's lap. My feet hit the floor, and I ran. I kicked off my shoes and savored the satisfying *thunk* when they hit the wall.

"Where are you going?" Holden asked, a growl vibrating beneath his voice.

I needed to kick and punch. There was so much energy still coursing through my body.

Too late, I realized it was the magic. It burst through me and out my fingertips. Lights radiated inside the apartment, a rainbow laser show dancing around my body. While it blinded me and made me cringe, I was grateful that's all that happened.

“Why do I have to live like this?” I shouted in the middle of the magical light show.

A dark silhouette pushed through the lights and wrapped its arms around me. Holden’s familiar warmth sank into me and calmed the rioting magic still shooting through my body.

I gripped the front of his shirt as I buried my face in his chest. “No one wants to help me. They want me to live a lie so that they can pretend that nothing will ever go wrong again. They all saved the world once. Nothing bad can happen because they’ve already done all the work, so they refuse to acknowledge there’s other bad things in the world. Bad things happening to me.”

I felt like a brat screaming about how her parents wouldn’t buy her a car for her sixteenth birthday. If I told the truth, would that change anything? If I went straight to my parents, would they know what to do? I couldn’t help but feel like that wouldn’t work.

Not only would it backfire, but I would be stuck in the shadow of what happened in Lakesedge so long ago. The four saviors and their beloved mates, saving the world from apocalypses and world devouring beasts, would never understand what it was like to be a villain.

“This is so *stupid*.” I soaked Holden’s shirt with my tears of anger.

“You said you wanted to go to the Goblin Market yourself. Do you still want to go?”

He was a man of action. He left little up to thought and contemplation. If I said I wanted to do something, Holden would be right there behind me. He wouldn’t tell me it was a useless idea. He wouldn’t throw me into a tower to keep me safe.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” I whispered into his chest.

He let out a deep sigh that almost sounded like a moan, as if it felt good to hear me say that. “I don’t know either.”

Tempted as I was to ask what he meant by that, I kept my mouth shut. It almost sounded like he knew my wild antics would get me into trouble. But there was a note of softness in his words that caught me off guard and told me that wasn't exactly what he had in mind.

Still, I couldn't parse the meaning behind his words. Overthinking it left me spinning, confused and adrift in my tumbling thoughts. Was there a chance we could have more than our friendship? Or was I peering too far into things?

I wanted to hold onto him and keep him all to myself. There was no way that his mate could be the reincarnation of Beryl. No matter how badly I wanted to be myself, only Ivy Rae and nothing more, I knew that the threads of fate had other ideas. My fate was still tied to Beryl's, even if that unseelie fae didn't think so.

"Is there another Goblin Market soon?" Holden asked.

I peeled away from him and the shirt that I'd soaked with my tears. With a wave of my hand, the moisture vanished, leaving his shirt dry once again as if I hadn't just sobbed into his chest.

"There's only one way to find out." I grinned smugly as I shoved all of my wandering thoughts down into a bottomless box that I chucked into the back of my mind so that I wouldn't be tempted to open it later.

Holden narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What have you been up to without me?"

He almost sounded offended, like I should have brought him on my escapades through the Goblin Market. To be fair, it was difficult enough to sneak in on my own. Bringing him tonight would add an extra layer of danger.

While the Goblin Market wasn't exactly dangerous, if you didn't know how to talk to the vendors, you could find yourself roped into a binding contract that could cost you both your big toes, a chunk of your soul, and a fraction of your fate thread. For me, it was an escape. I talked to no one and kept a glamour firmly fixed over my face.

Everyone acted like it was such a shameful thing for a princess to do. They whispered about the Goblin Market like I wouldn't hear them, like they were saving me from the audacious event that invaded their perfect territory.

Of course, curiosity and a sense of adventure had gotten the best of me. Growing up in the fae wilds, I'd become accustomed to things that mortals could only have nightmares about. I fell from Seelie to Unseelie realms when I dreamed there. Encountering rusalkas and pookahs made entering the Goblin Market seem like a dream.

Swallowing, I realized that this was a part of myself that I'd kept from Holden. I stole a glance at him and wondered how he would feel knowing that I'd been holding back. He was my best friend, but I hadn't trusted his mother. Holden might have kept my dirty little secret, but his mother could have forced it out of him and gone to my Mom.

Once again, the network of moms and aunts and family friends kept us from truly being ourselves. I was an adult. It was time that Holden see how I'd lived my life when he wasn't around.

Steepling my fingers together, I tilted my head sheepishly in preparation for my confession. "I need you to know something."

Holden

I TONGUED my canines in displeasure. The dark of night was cut by the sickly orange glow of old streetlights. Glass crunched underfoot with every step. We were in a part of Syracuse that wasn't very well loved by the mortals. They let it accrue shattered bottles, lost shoes on the power lines, and menacing graffiti—though I thought I saw some warding sigils in the dripping paint that might have explained why mortal authorities didn't frequent this neighborhood as much.

The fact that Ivy came here without me all throughout our lives left my beast restless. It paced back and forth within the

cramped space that was my body. I watched the back of Ivy's head as she led us forward. Her blond hair bobbed with every step. The brightness of her being was at odds with the dingy neighborhood, making it hard to believe this was where she went when we weren't together.

Near a concrete underpass, Ivy paused and spun on her heel. She waved her hand in the air. Arcana dripped from her fingers like holographic light turned liquid. It crept over me and covered me in something she called a *glamour*. I called it strangely uncomfortable.

Our visages changed before my eyes. Her high fae cheekbones and blond hair vanished. An elven woman with lavender skin appeared, looking like she could be Del's little sister. I lifted my own hand, but my skin tone hadn't changed. A glance into the reflective darkness of my phone's screen told me that Ivy had turned me into what one might call a *Chad*.

Silent, I gave her a questioning glare.

She laughed, took my hand, and led me up the concrete incline beneath the underpass. When she reached out with her other hand, a door appeared. In my mind, it could only lead to a small enclosure. There was nowhere else to really go.

However, fae magic worked wonders.

When she pushed the door open, it led into a massive courtyard with glowing lights suspended mid-air over the myriad of tents and kiosks that filled the ground. The smell of roasting meat would have been enticing were it not for the reek of goblin feet that sat right underneath it.

Once more, I glanced at Ivy as if to ask if this was a good idea. She'd been here a hundred times before. What could we learn tonight that she hadn't already learned on her own?

If I were honest, I'd admit that her trips here on her own had left me unhappy. It wasn't that she'd lied to me, even by omission. She was her own woman, allowed to have her own life. My dragon wanted to be with her, though. It needed to be beside her in case trouble found its way to her.

The beast's claws stabbed into my gut with every step in its frantic pacing. I tried to swallow, but there was a lump in my throat that I couldn't get past. No matter what I did to alleviate the mounting tension between my shoulder blades, I couldn't escape.

If I couldn't protect her, if she was somewhere far away from me and I failed to protect her when she needed me, my beast would tear its way out of me. I knew it for sure. I couldn't let her go back to college. Not for fear of my own sanity and safety, but for fear of what may happen when I wasn't there.

Maddox's gaze prickled along my skin even though he wasn't here. I could feel him watching me, a look like *I warned you* on his face. Sucking in a breath, I resolved to prove him wrong.

"What are we looking for?" I asked past the stubborn lump in my throat.

Ivy tilted her head curiously. I watched her attention flit across the many wares displayed all around us like she was a crow, and these were all shiny little trinkets to hide away in her nest. What had she traded away for a collection from the market? What would it cost her in the end?

"I'm not sure. I know that Mom and Addie came here before I was born." She sighed, pausing to face me. Her lips were pursed in thought, her eyes still bouncing everywhere. "Whatever happened here that they don't want to tell me about is coming back to bite *me* in the ass. Hilda said there were things in the dark corners of the market. It has to have something to do with those stalls."

Ivy turned and took off into the crowd. I understood that she was eager to get to the bottom of this, but I couldn't keep her safe if she didn't stay near me. Following the familiar bob of her footsteps, I chased after her.

The beast caught the familiar scent of the fae that'd invaded Ivy's apartment. I paused and lifted my nose to the air. The need to hunt tightened my core. The world burst with color as the dragon in me shoved power into my eyes. My

teeth pressed into my tongue and sharp claws bit into the skin of my palms. The creature was close, so close I could almost taste his blood on my tongue.

Just another step further. I would find him, kill him, and keep my Ivy safe.

The words that'd just crossed my mind sent me reeling. I paused and rocked on my heels as I digested what'd just happened.

My Ivy?

My beast was growing too attached to her. At this rate, it would never settle for a mate. The creature had latched onto Ivy before any potential mate could come along. I wasn't sure why it looked to her the way it did. Perhaps it came with the close proximity of growing up together.

I would never know another woman as well as I knew Ivy, even if I spent the rest of my life trying to learn.

I sniffed the air in search of the rotten creature and realized that Ivy had slipped away without my knowledge. My beast slammed into me and sent me staggering forward. I caught myself against the post of a kiosk and made it tremble under the force of my impact. The vendor beneath the canopy gave me a shrewd look with his nose wrinkled. His green goblin ear twitched with annoyance.

Though I opened my mouth to apologize, only the dragon's growl escaped. The air sparked with unspent electricity. I inhaled sharply, shoved off the pole, and threw myself into the crowd to find Ivy.

That was my first mistake.

People pressed in on me from all sides. Their shoulders brushed mine. Their breaths mingled with mine. Everything was too close. Ivy was nowhere to be seen.

The beast clawed at the inside of my skin. I could feel hot blood welling on my chest, soaking into my shirt. If I couldn't find her, the beast would make its presence known. The Market was too cramped. Too many people would get hurt.

Thunder clapped. I cringed, knowing that I'd pulled the storm close. My head spun. I couldn't reach out and take control of the ions vibrating in the air. Electricity threatened to slam down into me as my breath shuddered.

I pressed my eyes shut and tried to gather myself. People shoved into me from all sides. The sounds of vendors calling out their wares grew too loud. Ivy was nowhere. I couldn't help her. She'd given me one job, and I'd failed.

I'd lost her.

Ivy Rae

THE FAMILIARITY of the Market eased the growing tension in my chest as I wandered around, my eyes drifting over every little bauble on display. I let my hand hover in the air so I could feel the arcana wafting off each item I passed. I could feel the magical auras of the items brushing up against my own arcana like stray cats greeting me. It was a familiar sensation that made me giddy.

My attention should have been on the task at hand, but I'd fallen into old habits just so I could forget my woes for a heartbeat. When I remembered myself and straightened, I glanced back to see if Holden had become annoyed with my flightiness.

Except...Holden wasn't there.

I scowled and tilted my head. Turning back to the old lady under the nearest tent, I almost asked her if she'd seen a dragon shifter. Not only would that blow our cover, but the answer to that question would cost me something—something I probably didn't want to pay.

Cursing under my breath, I turned and shoved into the crowd in search of Holden. He was probably fine. He was a grown man.

But my chest turned tight. I closed my hand as if I could feel his in my grasp. It wasn't a good idea to separate tonight

of all nights.

The smell of rot tickled my nose. It turned me around, and I saw the shadowed alley ahead that led into the part of the Market that I'd never explored. The shadows wriggled in excitement when they noticed me watching. Not even the floating lanterns overhead could push them back.

I licked my lips. What would I find in there? Would I come face to face with the fae man who'd broken into my room? What would I say to him? Sure, I had questions. There was no telling if he would have answers. He'd been cryptic about what he wanted.

Perhaps I could take a peek at what was sold beyond the boundary of the shadows. If I could tell what the vendors here sold, then I'd have a good idea of what the fae man wanted from me.

I took a timid step forward, my hand clutched over my heart like I was praying for the courage to dive into this darkness.

“Are you ready for what lies beyond, pretty missy?” a shrewd saleswoman nearby asked. She tilted her head forward, a leather patch over one eye as the other sized me up. “Be careful in a place like that, or you'll find yourself enlisted in the Sluagh.”

I straightened. “The Sluagh doesn't enlist anymore.”

I should know—it was Dad's army of trapped spirits that he was trying to free. Though my noble response caught the woman's attention and made her narrow her eyes at me. If the glamour hiding my identity fell, then all would know that another Seelie princess came through. I wasn't trying to gentrify the area, but they wouldn't believe that.

They would run me out to keep me from trying to close their Market in some noble attempt to spread good in the world. That wasn't the kind of person that I was, but many couldn't tell. They saw the label of Seelie and spat in my direction.

Most days, I didn't really feel like a Seelie fae, but that wasn't something I was about to bring up right now.

"What lies beyond the shadows?" I asked.

A cruel smile spread across her face, splitting it from ear to ear. The grin put several broken canines on display. Somehow, the shattered teeth looked even more menacing than actual fangs might.

"It all depends on what you're looking for. Perhaps I could interest you in a trade here, instead. I could save you a world of trouble. You don't want to be tracked down like that woman who stole a leaf from the world tree." The vendor shook her goblin head and clicked her tongue. "Not sure what that one was thinking, stealing from the salesmen back there. That's just inviting death upon yourself and everyone you love."

My skin tingled as if something important had happened, but I was too daft to really understand what was going on. Swallowing, I could feel the shadows ahead trying to pull me in, but a thought lingered on my mind—*Holden*.

I didn't know how I knew, but I could tell that he needed me. If I spent too much longer here, I would betray him, and that was the very last thing I wanted to do today. I could find information any day of the week.

Holden needed me.

Just as I spun and lurched back towards the center of the market, an eruption burst outwards. I threw my arms over my face as tents and poles and lanterns went flying through the air. Everyone cried out. There were goblin screeches, elven cries of dismay, and a few curse words that I didn't understand—though I knew that tone so well.

A dragon roar shook the air. My stomach hit the pavement. Without thinking, I shot forward as fast as my fae feet could carry me. My heart pounded an urgent beat inside my chest, as if shaking the bars of my ribcage in a desperate attempt to reach Holden faster.

At the center of the market, I skidded to a halt. The electricity in the air made every hair on my body stand on end.

People shoved their way around me, jostling me side to side while I tried to get a better look at the black-scaled dragon tossing his head.

He took out another stall.

The cost of the damages would be insane if anyone found out we were behind this. I shoved that thought away and climbed over the fleeing crowd. Was it rude to step on a goblin's shoulder? Most likely, but I was in no mood to care about Seelie pleasantries.

This was the Goblin Market and the rules of polite interaction were different here. The goblin in question gave me a scowl before catching sight of the dragon and rushing off to safety.

“Ho-Hey!” I almost said his name.

Biting my tongue, I waved my arms in front of me to get his attention. Someone grabbed my shirt and yanked me back.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” someone hissed.

The dragon paused and looked down at us with electric eyes. The beast's gaze narrowed on the person dragging me away. When Holden's maw opened and the air charged with electricity, I yanked myself free of the good Samaritan's grasp.

“Don't worry about me,” I said in a rushed tone, mostly breathy as my lungs clenched tight with worry. “I'll be fine. I'm...I'm a dragon wrangler. It's what I do every day.”

The lie slid off my tongue as easily as any other truth, proving that the folktale about fae being unable to lie was pure propaganda.

The Samaritan gave me a pleading look before glancing back at the beast. Their face drained of all color before they left me to my stupid fate.

I turned back to Holden. He'd hunched his shoulders and lowered his head to glare at the person who'd tried to help me. I reached up, slapped my hand on the side of his muzzle, and pulled his attention to me.

“What are you doing?” I asked softly.

He'd lost control. It was the first time I'd ever seen it happen. Holden had always been a level-headed kind of man. He wasn't one to lose his temper or let his dragon get the best of him. In fact, he and his beast had always been on good terms as far as I could remember.

Something had pushed him over the edge. I couldn't help but fear that he'd accidentally sold his control to a shifty vendor. If that was the case, I would gladly level the entire Market to the ground. Already, I could feel the arcana reaching towards my feet in an attempt to penetrate the ground. If I wanted, I could break the earth with massive vines and finish wrecking the rest of the Market.

But I held back.

For now.

My magic still ran rampant, coursing through my veins like budding vines waiting to unfurl. With nowhere to go, the magic begged to be unleashed. If I didn't do something with it, the magic would blow up in my face, and we didn't need two magical meltdowns in one night.

Holden jerked to the left, snarling at someone who'd dared step close. Thunder cracked and shook the world around us. I grabbed onto the magic trying to break free of me and lashed out with it like a leash.

A vine wrapped around Holden's muzzle. I yanked it closer to me as more vines rose to entwine him in a trap of my own making. He tried to lift his feet, but my vines yanked him back down to the earth.

He strained, his claws digging into the earth. I had to dig my heels in to keep him from lunging at the random person. Would he snap his jaws? Or would he bite down and cover the earth with blood just to protect me from a threat only he perceived? It didn't matter because the burgeoning fae magic in my core helped me hold him back.

The person managed to disappear safely into the wreckage of the market, and Holden eased his fight. He hunkered down onto the ground beside me. My chest heaved with the effort

and excitement of the fight. As the adrenaline started to fade, reality set in.

Holden pushed his muzzle into my hand and blew out a hot breath. I couldn't help but scowl with concern as I watched him close his eyes and relax. This wasn't what I'd expected. No vendor had stolen his control in a shifty deal.

He'd panicked when he lost me.

Guilt slammed into me like a truck. It nearly plowed me off my feet. I stared up at him, my lips parted, and beat myself up for wandering off.

“Let's get out of here.”

Before people recovered from their fear and came at us for damage expenses.

I harnessed the power of the in-between moment from one breath to the next and used it to fling us far away from the Goblin Market. I knew that I was losing an opportunity to learn more about why I was being hunted, but there would be other nights. There had to be.

Still, my stomach churned uneasily. Fear turned it sour as I thought about how I would still be hunted.

This time, I didn't stumble between worlds. There was no tree eerily similar to the one that'd grown in my living room. Instead, we landed on the beach. The sand greeted us with its harsh indifference—this stuff really was the worst. It was already in my shoes, somehow.

“Can you shift back?” My voice was a whisper in the night with the river water softly lapping at the shore, trying to swallow my words.

The stars overhead blinked out as clouds gathered with the imminent threat of an oncoming storm. It warned me that Holden's emotions were still getting the best of him. When thunder rumbled, I knew that he was still battling himself.

So, I ran my hand along his scales and wondered why losing me would make him lose control. It wasn't like we were mates. He had no reason to fear for my safety other than for

the sake of our friendship. That didn't feel like enough of a reason to lose control.

When Holden's form shifted, he immediately slammed into me and threw me back into the sand. My heart did a backflip—not in fear but in unexpected excitement as the length of his body pressed into mine.

He buried his face in the crook of my neck and breathed deep. I felt him shudder above me, and a warmth sparked deep in my core. Brain scrambled, I didn't know what to do. Did I hold him? Did I push him away? I didn't know what I wanted, only that this fire continued to grow and threatened to consume me.

“Don't leave me again,” he growled into my skin.

The fire in my core turned so hot I thought it would incinerate me with a single lick of the flame. My own breath quivered on my lips. I wrapped my arms around him and dug my nails into his skin so that we could be closer.

This was my best friend; these feelings shouldn't have been happening.

Why did I suddenly want him buried deep inside me, reaching places that only toys had ever touched before? I wanted him to stroke those hidden spots until the skies cleared and the stars above were burned into my memory forever so that I might never forget him.

As if I could.

Holden was a part of me. There'd almost never been a moment where we weren't together.

He grasped my hips, his fingers demanding, near bruising. He held onto me for dear life. If I should vanish again, I knew he would come completely undone.

And so, I whispered, “I'm not going anywhere.”

Before I knew what was happening, Holden's teeth pressed down on the nape of my neck. The sharp fangs punctured skin, but there was no pain. Pleasure burst through me. It was as if a

star had fallen from the sky and crashed right into me. I bucked beneath him with every new ripple of pleasure.

What was this? Why did it feel so right?

Holden pulled back. He rose above me, his eyes on the wound in my neck. His face drained of color. Brows arched and eyes so wide I saw the whites, he stared aghast at what he'd done.

Through the pleasure still radiating through my body, I had trouble seeing past the haze clouding my mind. I had no idea what was wrong. In fact, everything seemed great. In this moment, nothing bad could happen.

But the fog slowly cleared. The haze of pleasure couldn't remain forever, and sense started to sink in. I put a hand to my neck only for it to come away with blood.

The sight made my head spin. The stars above turned blurry as they wobbled across the sky.

"I'm so sorry," Holden said, frantically.

"Did you just mark me as your mate?" I asked before I passed out.

I nervously covered the mark on my neck with my hand. Thoughts of what happened the other night turned over and over in my mind. I couldn't make sense of anything that'd happened, and Holden wasn't around to answer any questions.

After the sight of my own blood had knocked me out, Holden must have taken me home somehow because I'd woken in my own apartment. A part of me was slightly disappointed that I hadn't woken up in his bed, but I understood that I hadn't been in a position to consent to that, and Holden had respected it.

It would have been nice if he'd been able to stick around and answer a few questions. Instead, I'd found a note on the kitchen island. Once again, his mother had perfect timing. She'd called him away to deal with something on Pack territory.

I threw the note down and tossed myself in the shower. Thankfully, Holden had cleaned up the mating mark on my neck. There was no blood to wash away, but every time my hands grazed the sensitive mark, I shuddered with desire.

"Bro, this is the weirdest thing to happen to me all week," I shouted in the shower because I knew no one could hear me.

There was a Goblin Market vendor hunting me down as if I'd personally stolen from him, this strange man who kept appearing wherever I turned. And yet, this mark somehow

outdid the weird vendor's attempts at being intimidating and cryptic, because this was all I could think about now.

Outside the shower, I debated how I was going to cover this up. Would a glamour hold up under the prying gaze of Seelie nobles? Because I wasn't about to slap makeup over this. Even the slightest touch set it ablaze—in a sensual way—and I wasn't about to pound makeup over it.

In the end, I decided on a scarf which was wildly conspicuous all by itself. Who wore a scarf, even a silk one, in the heat of a New York summer? Stepping outside, the humidity rushed at me and reminded me why I wanted to wear the least amount of fabric possible.

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered under my breath.

“You called?” Holden's voice reached out to me.

I jumped, startled. Spinning, I watched him saunter up to me with his hands in his pockets. He wore faded worker's denim as if the heat and humidity in the air could do nothing to him. I scowled jealously.

Jam packed with untampered fae magic, and I still couldn't control the weather. It was an abysmal default in my design. Then again, perhaps it was karma coming to bite Beryl in the ass. If that was the case, then I wanted to take up an argument with the Fates. There was no reason that *I* had to suffer for the things a dead woman did.

Was Beryl dead, though? If I lived and breathed, then would she ever truly be dead? I wanted to believe I could be someone else, apart from the awful legacy that Beryl left behind, but I could never quite separate myself from it.

“Wait,” I said as Holden's words sank in and distracted me from my spiraling thoughts. “Did you just answer to *son of a bitch?*”

Though his countenance seemed grim, a small smile reached the corners of his mouth. His hesitation to fully smile left me unsettled. I touched the scarf around my throat, but that's not where his eyes went. Holden looked down at the dirt, his eyes shadowed.

An electrical jolt slammed into me when I heard my mother's voice behind me and realized what'd happened.

Someone had seen us at the market and told our parents.

Without thinking, I grabbed Holden's arm and pushed so that we fell in-between before my mom could catch up to us. She must have stepped into my apartment—which boldly assumed I wouldn't be doing anything that required privacy—in order to find me.

Holden and I landed just outside of town, at an abandoned establishment that used to be a bar back in our parents' day. I threw my hands in the air and wandered down to the edge of the creek so I could throw myself onto the ground and wrap my arms around my knees.

Chin on the tops of my knees, I said, "Well, today can't get any worse."

"That's a bit dramatic," Holden said. "It can always get worse."

I slowly turned to glare up at him. "Sir."

He gave a shrug, though there was a wry grin on the corner of his mouth. Country boy's humor was as dry as ever, but it had me smiling alongside him. He bent and plucked a rock from the ground so he could skip it across the water.

"Nothing else has happened while I was gone, right?" He tossed the rock in his hand a couple of times before tearing his gaze away from me so he could chuck the rock.

"I mean, a lot has happened." I put a hand over the mating mark on my neck.

He wasn't talking about it. Was I insane, or was he avoiding the topic?

Holden sighed. "I mean with the Unseelie man. He hasn't returned yet. Has he?"

"Oh." I couldn't help the way my voice dropped with disappointment.

Holden was absolutely avoiding talking about the mark on my neck. Just thinking about it, I could feel the pressure of his body on mine and his teeth in my skin. I shuddered with a ripple of pleasure like I'd been possessed by the ghost of the night before.

"Are you cold?" Holden shrugged off his thin plaid shirt and placed it over my shoulders.

I didn't know how to tell him that I was only wearing the scarf as a cover up, and I was, in fact, very freaking hot. Instead, I returned to the topic at hand.

Shaking my head, I said, "No, nothing has happened."

Holden gave a hopeful shrug before crouching beside me. "Maybe he did what he came to do? The guy wanted to give you a fright, and that's what he did. There's a possibility that's all he really wanted out of you."

I recalled the Unseelie man and his wicked, inhuman grin. Holden was hopeful, but I'd seen the unhinged violence waiting behind that man's eyes. He'd given me a deadline, and if I didn't deliver by then, there would be consequences.

How could I tell Holden that when he wouldn't even approach the subject of the mating mark? The man had his head in the dirt, and it was increasingly obvious.

Without another word, I shot up to my feet. "I think I have to meet my maker."

"Hold up! What does that even mean?"

Over my shoulder, I said, "Don't worry. I'm just going to talk to my mom."

Holden groaned. I knew that meant his own conversation with Ness had gone horribly. She would probably ship him off to Siberia next week.

Holden

ALONE ON THE bank of the old creek, I stared at the murky water as I turned a river-worn stone over in my hands. There was a plane ticket to Colorado on my kitchen table back home, and if I didn't get on that plane, there would be hell to pay.

Ivy's scent lingered in the air. The only way the beast would get on that plane was if Ivy went, too.

I groaned and the sound turned into the dragon's growl. I couldn't figure out what was happening to me. Every time I turned around, the dragon did something unexpected. And every time it acted on its own, it hurt Ivy.

She deserved better. I hadn't meant to mark her like that. Of course, I'd noticed the scarf around her neck. She'd hidden the shame of the mark that I'd forced upon her. Over and over, she'd touched it like she needed to make sure that it was hidden.

Her hatred of it had left the beast unsettled. I'd busied my hands with rock skipping because the beast would have paced and thrashed otherwise. It wanted her compliance in the matter. The beast seemed to think that this was right, that she was our fated mate.

It was confused. I loved Ivy dearly, but we'd never discussed taking this out of a friendship and into anything more. If she didn't bring it up, then I assumed that meant she didn't want anything to change.

There must have been a man waiting for her back at her college. The thought made my beast snarl and slam into me, but I wasn't going to let it break out like it had the night before. I dug in my heels and told the creature that it would listen to me from now on.

I'd come close to hurting innocent people last night. The beast knew that and felt shame for what it'd done, but it didn't apologize. In the beast's eyes, Ivy had been in danger. It'd only been protecting her.

I reared back and threw the stone as hard as I could. Scales burst along my forearm as the dragon power surged through my body. Thunder boomed, but not from the sky. The stone

made a cracking sound that shook the air as it zoomed over the creek and into the distant woods beyond.

Turning around, I took in the bar that'd been shut down for a couple of years now. Battles had been fought here, according to Aunt Vi. She and Uncle Morgan had fought off some imps here while trying to save the world from a divine apocalypse.

The bar hadn't survived the years in a financial sense, but the building still stood. It needed some work, but that was the kind of stuff I'd learned working for Dad, Rhoan, and Arven. Perhaps doing something with my hands would keep my mind off Ivy.

It could distract me long enough to meet a mate who wanted to love me, not that I wanted anyone else.

Would it be so bad to love someone knowing they might never return the feeling? Would it drive me to the depths of Treasure Sickness?

Mom was going to be pissed, but I could not get on that flight to Colorado. Not even if it meant saving the reputation of the Lakesedge Pack—because there was no hiding the fact that a dragon shifter had destroyed the local Goblin Market.

Mom wasn't at my apartment when I got there. I half expected to find her sitting on my couch, facing the door, waiting for me to return. Instead, there was a box waiting for me on the kitchen island.

It was the same kind of gift box that the Unseelie man had left the first time around. My stomach dropped at the sight of it. Ice hit my veins and trickled through my limbs until it numbed my fingertips.

Instead of investigating, I slowly backed out of the room and closed the door behind me. There were consequences that I still had to face. I wasn't going to open that box and add more trouble onto my plate until after I spoke to Mom.

All this stepping in-between not only worked up an appetite, but it helped relieve a bit of the magical build-up in my body. When I entered Mom's café, I breathed a contented sigh and stepped into the back to grab myself some food before anyone could catch me. I wanted to savor the moment between a full stomach and empty magic reserves, when all was right in the world.

There was only one other place that I'd found the same kind of peace, and it'd been beneath Holden on the beach. Honestly, I was still upset that he'd avoided the topic. A part of me yearned for something only he could give me. Was it time to push our lifelong friendship into something more?

Into a real relationship? Like, a *couple's* relationship?

I didn't have long to think about it before Mom found me. She came up from behind and clamped her hands around my shoulders like I might step in-between and vanish again. It was a valid concern, to be fair.

"Darling daughter, *what have you been up to?*" Mom spun me around.

My drink sloshed in the cup, forcing me to quickly slap a travel lid onto it before I wore the contents. Mom stepped back and let me secure my drink. That's what I loved about my mother. She wasn't anything like Ness. It was the main reason I felt safe enough to meet her and accept the consequences of my actions.

Mom didn't look disappointed or even mad. She simply waited for an explanation.

The question was, how much could I tell her?

"I go to the Goblin Market on my own a lot," I blurted out as if my drink had been laced with a truth potion.

I'd made it myself, so that couldn't be the case. Still, I scowled down at the drink like it was the one to betray me and not myself.

"I know," Mom said.

My head snapped up. I blinked in surprise. "Y-you know?"

She gave a knowing grin and tapped her temple. "I'm your mother. Of course, I know."

Cerridwen James wasn't *really* my mom. She'd raised me and helped me become who I was today, though, and that's all that mattered to me. I owed her so much for raising me to become someone who wasn't the Beryl of the past. Mom had led me down an altogether new path.

But when her suspicious gaze narrowed on the scarf around my neck, my face turned red-hot. I licked my lips nervously as I tried to divert the conversation. Mom didn't end up mating with a shifter, but many of her friends had. She knew exactly what I was covering up, and I was not in the mood to discuss it.

“So, about the Goblin Market...” I took a sip from my drink and waited for it to reach the sinking pit of my stomach. “You knew the whole time?”

Mom nodded. “What happened with Holden? His mother is going to lose her mind if he sold something at the Market.”

I sucked in a breath. While I hadn’t been there when Holden lost control, so I didn’t know for sure what’d happened, I had a feeling that this wasn’t about the Market vendors at all. Holden’s loss of control had everything to do with *me*.

That’s the only reason why his beast would push him to mark me right after the disaster at the Market. The beast needed to show the world that I belonged to Holden. Only, now I wasn’t sure that Holden agreed with his beast.

It certainly would be a kick in the gut to find out that Holden didn’t like me that way when I was starting to feel butterflies every time I saw him.

Letting out a growling sigh, I tilted my head back and let it tap the wall behind me. The ceiling didn’t offer me any respite, but the sigh felt nice, nonetheless.

“Ivy Rae, what does *auuuuuuuugh* mean? Please translate for me.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at Mom’s directness and the humor it held. “Holden didn’t sell anything. Not that I know of, anyway. It was just a mishap. I think the crowd overwhelmed him, and I’d wandered away while distracted.”

Mom narrowed her eyes but didn’t say anything. She was too sharp to miss the real facts, but she didn’t lay any of them out. Mom kept the information to herself—perhaps because we didn’t need Dad showing up on the Callahans’ doorstep with a metaphorical shotgun.

Could Holden and I be together? Even if we had a fate bond, could we tie the two powerhouses of Lakesedge together like that? The Seelie Court and the Lakesedge Pack were two separate entities that formed part of the power balance here.

Making them one entity would upset the structure and tilt it too far one way.

Mom put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry. Go home and get some rest. We’ll figure everything out.”

I had a feeling she wasn’t just talking about the expenses at the Goblin Market. Mom knew so much, and she had my back the whole way.

Though I’d run away from Mom at first, I ended up being grateful that I’d gone back to talk to her. Here, I wasn’t Beryl. I wasn’t a threat waiting to happen. I threw my arms around Mom’s shoulders and hugged her tight—though I didn’t tell her about the coffee I splashed on the back of her white shirt.

The step in-between to return home took the last bit of magic I had left that didn’t belong to Beryl. My mind wandered as I set foot in a familiar space again. I considered why Beryl’s memory might have a separate arcana well from my own if we were the same person. That was something that’d always bothered me.

Before I could think too hard on it, I lifted my head and found Holden with the gift box in his hands. He looked up as he cracked it open. Panic hit my heart like an arrow that flung me forward. Time slowed when I lurched towards him, my coffee forgotten in my rush to snatch the box from him.

My fingertips grazed the lip of the open box. Holden shouted, asking what I was doing. I just barely tilted the box away from him and the contents spilled out at me. A single glass shard tumbled out. Instinctively, I lifted my other hand to catch it.

The moment the shard pricked my palm, I knew I’d made a mistake. I should have just left it to fall on the ground. Instead, the glass found blood and magic bloomed in the air. It had a dark, earthy scent that eclipsed my senses with images of a deep briar right before darkness claimed me.

Holden

I CAUGHT Ivy before her body could hit the ground. The beast in me snarled at the threat, but there was no one here to blame save for myself. I'd been nosy with the idea that my inspection would save Ivy. If I looked at what the box held, then I could keep her safe from any threat inside.

Instead, I'd been the ignition for this turn of events. Had I just left it alone, she wouldn't have tried to save me from it, too.

Cradling a motionless Ivy in my hands, I realized that's what she'd been trying to do. Ivy had tried to save me.

Now wasn't the time to be wondering if my best friend loved me the way I loved her. I gave her a gentle shake and asked her to wake. The prick of blood on her hand shouldn't have been enough to make her pass out since she'd barely laid eyes on it. Still, I expected her to wake the same as always.

When Ivy remained asleep, my beast began pacing. I carried her into the bedroom and climbed into the bed with her because my beast could not bear the thought of being apart from her. I had to touch her, hold her, make sure she was safe under my wing.

I could feel my beast's scales as it tried to get closer to Ivy, too. The creature pressed against the inside of my skin, claws and scales dragging along my senses. It would break free and fill the tiny apartment if I didn't get my emotions under control.

They were only ever this wild around her. They always had been. I'd followed Ivy and her recklessness for so long that I'd become accustomed to the fear that came with being around her. I craved it like a junkie ready for the next thrill adventure.

If she jumped off a cliff, I would follow just to make sure that she was safe. I had no idea why she needed to feel the brush of death if she was so afraid of the sight of blood—the two facts always contradicted each other. Every scraped knee and broken bone made her woozy to the point of passing out, but it never stopped her from enjoying life.

If anything, it made her a gentle soul. Ivy didn't hesitate to put herself in harm's way for the thrill of it, but she never hurt anyone.

Not like I was going to hurt this Unseelie for what he'd done. It occurred to me that Ivy had fallen into a magical slumber. That explained the smell of dense, dark foliage in the air. It was a kind of spell holding her under.

Though I knew of ways to wake someone from an enchanted sleep like that, I couldn't bring myself to touch her without her consent again. I'd already gone too far when I'd marked her. If I kissed her and it broke the spell, I would be saving her, but I'd also be pushing boundaries.

And so, I was stuck here, growling in a constant battle with the beast that urged me to save her. No matter how I pushed back, the beast doubled down and fought harder. Scales erupted along my skin. Thunder rolled outside over the lake. The air inside made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

"I don't know how to save you in there," I wished into Ivy's skin. "How do I rescue you when you're right here in my arms?"

A creak of the floorboards sent my heart racing. A new smell crept into the room, familiar and unwanted. I scooped Ivy up into my arms as talons burst from my toes and ripped through my boots.

"Give the girl to me," a voice said. "I only wish to take what was stolen from me."

I nearly howled in frustration as I tumbled head over heels like Alice falling into a messed-up Wonderland. The darkness around me swirled, bleeding red in a way that made my head light. Or, maybe, my head spun because I was falling.

Fists clenched at my sides, I cursed the Unseelie man and his damned enchantment. It was an old spell, the same one Sleeping Beauty got smacked with. While true-love's-kiss could save me, I knew Holden well enough to know he wasn't going to kiss me without permission.

And that would only help if I was his actual mate, which I had no way of telling if I was or not because he wouldn't talk about it. When I eventually get out of here, I was going to sit him down and make him talk—one way or another.

My ass hit the hard ground all of a sudden. Pain sent bolts of light to my vision as I starfished on the ground and refused to move.

"This sucks ass." I grumbled.

Laughter erupted around me in waves of whispers. The cacophony tried to push in around me, but I clamped my hands over my ears because I couldn't stand the sound of it. The laugh was my voice...but *wrong*.

This wasn't my laughter, but it did belong to a version of me. I shuddered this close to her. I realized, belatedly, that I'd given the Unseelie man gasoline to throw on the smoldering remnants of my own problems. The look on his face when I

mentioned Beryl had told me he didn't know she and I were one and the same.

Well, now he knew, and he was using it against me.

"You son of a bitch!" I screamed loud enough to block out the laughter for a heartbeat.

But the sound remained unrelenting. I cracked open an eye, expecting to see a version of my own face staring back at me, but Beryl was nowhere to be seen. Instead, there were hundreds of floating mirrors hovering around me. They all flashed my face back at me for an instant before opening into a dark scene.

Rapt, I stared at the largest mirror before me. A familiar face entered the vision.

"Tal!" I shouted like he could hear me.

This wasn't a portal, though. I realized when Tal was forced to his knees by several Unseelie fae that this had to be a memory. Though the corners were shadowed and barren, I could tell that this had to be the court under the lake, a version of it before Mom made it bloom with life. The Unseelie bound his wrists with rope and looped it through pulleys on the wall so they could hoist him high into the air.

Grim light cut through the window into the lake and highlighted the blood dripping down Taliesin's face. My voice cackled in delight once more. The vision stepped closer to Taliesin like I was in Beryl's body, watching through her eyes. She reached out and sliced him across the chest with her black talons.

I waited for the sight of blood to grant me a short reprieve. Though my head spun like I was falling all over again, I didn't pass out. The fact that I was already asleep probably had something to do with it.

There was no escape. I watched Taliesin's shirt soak through with blood. Doubling over, I retched, though nothing came up. Sour bile burned the back of my throat and seared my stomach while my vision slipped back and forth in a blur.

This was considerably worse than passing out, in my opinion.

Somehow, I managed to get back onto my shaky feet. I swayed uncertainly as the world snapped back into place. Before I could even think to turn away from the mirrors, another vision appeared. Though I threw my hands over my face, they did nothing to block the memory that came rushing back.

I saw my hand embedded in my own mother's chest. She looked to be around my own age, staring up at Beryl with open shock as blood ran down the front of her shirt. I clenched my hand around a beating mass of muscle.

Mom's heart.

Why did she save me? Why did Mom bring me back? I didn't understand how Beryl could have done all this only to be brought back. Was Mom a fool? What did she see in Beryl that made her eligible for redemption?

I exhaled through my mouth to stave off the rising wave of nausea and dread.

I'd nearly killed my own mother.

The looks that Ness gave me made so much more sense when another vision rose, and Holden's father filled the frame. Ryder Callahan's eyes were gold and glassy like he'd been drugged. He brought a chalice to his lips, tipped it, and threw the metal cup at the earthen wall when he realized it was empty.

Though I'd never seen this firsthand, I knew the effect that fae food had on mortals. Beryl must have forced him to eat the fruits that would poison his mind and leave him addicted, unable to consume anything else. But why? Why would Beryl go through the trouble to harm Ryder like that?

The seed of power in my chest hummed, thrumming as it overflowed with unshed power. I wanted to turn away from it. If it belonged to Beryl, then there was no way that I could possibly touch this vile magic. I refused to follow in her footsteps.

A scream built in my throat. Holding it back turned my throat raw and made my tongue burn.

Another scene emerged. Mom and Beryl sat at a table behind the café. The two seemed to engage in a charged banter, but the world around them kept changing. The sky rippled with the kind of lights that could only be seen in the far north—much further north than even New York.

The air tasted of raspberries and mint, a strange thing to taste. It chased away the nausea trying to keep its claws in me.

In the vision, Mom twisted in her chair. She locked eyes with me and smiled sweetly, that comforting reassurance that I was so familiar with radiating off her.

“This is your magic, too,” she said. “It’s about time you learn that.”

Her words made no sense. Was she talking to me?

“Yes, I’m talking to you.” Mom laughed gently. “Dreams are our domain. It runs in your blood.”

“But I’m not your child,” I whispered, feeling small.

Mom extended her hand through the memory and cupped my cheek. “We are still blood. Take control of this dream and make it your own. Weave the unimaginable and make your wildest dreams come true.”

The vision vanished, suddenly cut off. A male growl of frustration cut through the air. The Unseelie man had caught on to the invasion. But that wasn’t Mom, not really. That was my own dream magic, I realized when I noticed the burgeoning power leaking out of me.

Without needing direction, my magic had pressed out in all directions and woven a net around this cursed dream. All I had to do was reach out and pull to force the net around this curse. A laugh tried to bubble out of me, but it felt too much like Beryl. I swallowed the laugh, but I pulled on the net of arcana, nonetheless.

Yanking it tight, I carved through the curse and formed a protective layer between myself and the Unseelie man.

Suddenly, the air flooded with the taste of raspberries and mint. I became effervescent, as if floating on carbonation.

It lifted me up and out of the dream that was now mine.

I woke in Holden's arms, the world blurring past us. The sound of his heart thundered beneath my ear. It was echoed in his footsteps as he ran.

I gripped his shirt and tried to ask what was going on. Before I could speak, the world around us darkened. A laugh spilled out in all directions as if we'd been swallowed by whatever entity was chasing us.

While I'd been trapped in the sleeping curse, the Unseelie man had set out to catch me unawares. Yet, Holden had been there. Instead of standing his ground and fighting, he'd grabbed me to get me out of harm's way.

It was my turn to return the favor. With newfound power flowing through me, I wrapped us in a new web, a weave of a dream. The world around us fell away. Holden held me tighter to his chest as if a new threat had reared its head.

I reached up to touch his cheek. When our eyes met, I silently reassured him that everything would be all right.

That's what I wanted him to believe, at least. This magic was new, and my attempts to wield it were fumbling and flimsy. It was enough, though. The net wrapped around the Unseelie man's magic and caught him in a dream.

I let it fall away as Holden ran. We stepped out of the dream and back into reality in the middle of the Lakesedge street once more.

Holden slowed until he finally came to a stop and glanced back. His shoulders were still bunched tight, like he couldn't afford to let down his guard just yet.

I rolled out of his grasp and back onto my own feet, but I had to reach out and grab ahold of his sleeve to keep from falling over. Defeating the curse and using the new magic had left me woozy.

Holden spun and caught me before I could hit the ground. He pulled me tight to his chest where it was warm and smelled of him. I sighed and leaned into him. This was a living nightmare, being cursed and chased all the time, but moments like this eased my fears.

Now, if only he could get around to telling me why he'd marked me as his mate. That would be nice.

Only...I wasn't sure if I wanted him to, anymore. The visions of what Beryl had done filled my mind and left my footsteps heavy with guilt of things I couldn't change. If that was me in a past life, did I deserve to love Holden?

Beryl had very obviously hurt Holden's father.

The weave of fate that'd led me here only confused me. Why would fate push us together? It seemed cruel and unjust.

Holden

THIS WASN'T the same Ivy that I'd always known. That wasn't a bad thing, but it left me uneasy. Her eyes had taken on a deep violet shade in their depths. I stared into the jewels of her eyes and tried to figure out what could have changed.

My beast berated me for thinking anything could be wrong with our mate. To the dragon, she was, and always would be, *perfect*.

But Ivy pulled away and wrapped her arms around herself. While she'd been trapped in the sleeping curse, something had happened. I could wait for her to tell me, but the Unseelie man

would be back. He would come to claim whatever it was that he was looking for, and there was a chance that we would run out of time.

I wouldn't let any harm come to Ivy, but there were other things that could get between us. Clearly, something had. She started the lonely trek back to her apartment without saying anything, without even stepping in-between.

As much as I wanted to see it as an invitation to follow, I saw the solitude hanging around her and knew she needed a walk alone. My hands felt so empty without her. I flexed them, feeling my cold palms in the open air.

The beast in me paced, hungry for more of the woman it loved so dearly. If I didn't catch up to her, the beast would force me to do it. It would hijack my body and yank me in her direction like a magnet ever being pulled back towards her.

Maybe that wasn't the best analogy. There was likely something better, but I didn't care. The only thing I could think of was Ivy and the violet lurking in her eyes now. What was it? Where had it come from?

Was it another curse? If I went to her mother and asked, Ivy would see that as going behind her back. I couldn't betray her. No part of me would even be able to do it. My beast wouldn't allow it. If Ivy had a wish, I would have no option but to obey.

Still, I followed her back to the apartment. I kept my distance and didn't approach her, not even inside. When she retreated to her room, I stayed in the kitchen and leaned against the island counter. Phone in hand, I kept myself busy by ordering pizza.

Dad had taught me young. If a woman seemed upset, the first thing you should do is order food. If that didn't fix things, then there would be hell to pay later. At least her belly would be full, though.

Even as we ate, an hour later, Ivy remained silent. Her refusal to speak drove me mad. My mind spun with possibilities. I couldn't see through to the truth of anything.

She'd thrown a wall up between us even though she didn't kick me out.

This close proximity filled with cold silence was enough to make my beast dangerously restless.

"Thank you," Ivy said, finally breaking the silence.

I paused, letting my pizza crust fall to the plate. Would this lead somewhere? Was she finally going to talk?

It seemed like the both of us were doing a lot of *not talking* lately. We didn't tell others about the Unseelie man, we didn't talk about the mating mark, and we didn't talk about what'd happened here today.

We used to chat late into the night while we sat side by side under the stars. We used to be the closest of friends, and now a hole as big as the Grand Canyon sat between us.

Scowling, I looked down at my food. Except, the pizza crust now wriggled on the plate. Alarmed, I leapt over the kitchen island separating me from Ivy and snatched her out of her seat to pull her away from the thing on my plate.

Ivy shouted in surprise. I turned her away from the thing on the table, but her yelp behind me made me spin. The flowers on the wall—from her last magical outburst—had taken on faces. They laughed at us, pointing with leafy fingers like we were the laughingstock of the town. Their mouths split wide with vicious teeth.

My beast rioted in an attempt to escape. I warned it that shifting here would destroy Ivy's apartment, but the beast told me that this wasn't Ivy's apartment.

I noticed it now. The smell here was different. There was a sweetness on the air that left me sickened.

Spinning, I asked Ivy what was going on.

She stared, wide eyed at the disturbing flowers. Their vines pulled together into a bulbous body that ambled towards us. The creature lunged at Ivy.

Without thinking, I summoned crackling electricity into my hand. It wasn't fire, but it would burn all the same as I

slammed my hand down onto the thing's body.

Was I not allowed to mope in peace?

The plant creature in front of us shuddered at the impact of Holden's shock. It burned and filled the air with an acridly sweet smell before it collapsed, the poor thing charred and smoking.

What was this madness? All around us, the world came to life in disturbing ways. Inanimate objects formed eyes and mouths full of teeth. They split wide to cackle at us menacingly as they pulled other objects close as makeshift bodies.

It reminded me of Wonderland, only a whole lot creepier.

That's when I realized what this was. It had to be the Unseelie man's domain.

We'd somehow stumbled into his personal domain after I'd trapped him in a dream. That or...we'd been in the domain all along. When Holden grabbed me to run, the Unseelie man had already trapped Holden in this deranged world.

I couldn't blame Holden, though the accusation sat on the tip of my tongue. Instead of letting it loose, I bit down and tasted blood.

All we needed to do was step in-between to escape...or so I hoped.

When I grabbed Holden's hand and lurched, nothing happened. No magic came up to carry us away from this nightmare. I was still tapped dry. At least, that's how it felt. I

pressed my free palm to my chest and wondered if there was some sort of dampener on my arcana here.

“I welcome you to my magnificent world,” the Unseelie man said all around us. “I am Reginand of the Unruly Wilds, and I invite you to wander into my little wonder world.”

“What kind of a name is Reginand?” I asked out loud. “Did your mom hate the idea of a first and middle name, so she combined *Reginald* and *Ferdiand*? Two shit choices if you ask me.”

Now didn't seem like a good time to be shit-talking Reginand, but I couldn't help myself when I was this freaking frustrated.

I turned, ready to pull Holden out of the room so we could regroup. My hand was no longer holding his, anymore. Instead, a plant creature blushed as I stared at its vine in my hand. I quickly snapped my hand back as if burned.

Though I was curious to know what I'd been holding, I wasn't going to stick around and find out. I had to find Holden.

“Did you take him because I said your name was stupid?” I called into the air because I had no idea where Reginand really was.

I could not get over how dumb *Reginand* sounded. It was like a fae mimicking human names. That likely meant this was not the man's real name, so I would have no power over him.

“You and I have much to discuss,” Reginand said as he materialized before me.

I was rather thankful the vines didn't become a writhing mass that turned into Reginand. Instead, the shadows gathered as little particles that became the man crouched before me. He looked up at me with his unhinged grin. This close, I noticed a little X in the place of his pupil in one eye.

“You're not a fae.” The realization hit me out of nowhere.

He spread both hands before me and stared at them, his lips twisted to the sides. “What is fae by definition? I was

made by a fae, so that should make me fae, no matter the terms of my birth.”

The man was a sort of puppet. I could see the hinges of his too-long limbs now. I almost asked if Beryl had made him, but he'd been confused by the mention of her last time. I doubted he would harass me like this if Beryl had been his maker.

“Are you working for someone?” I asked, taking a half-step back.

He lifted his gaze as that smile spread once again. “I am a free fae, bound by no maker or court. My business is entirely my own. Speaking of which, you and I have much to discuss.”

I didn't want to talk terms. I wanted to get back to Holden. Where had Reginand put my dragon man? If I didn't get to Holden soon, he would fight with his beast. It would be the Goblin Market all over again.

I refused to leave Holden on his own. Even if I didn't deserve his love, he still deserved to be cared for. It was the least I could do to make up for all the horrible things I'd done in my past life. I would love him and care for him in every way I could.

I kicked Reginand in the shin. “Let us out of here, you asshole.”

Reginand slapped the floor with his massive hands, making the world shake around us. He lunged towards me, his snarling face in mine. I didn't flinch. Power, deep in my chest, burned like a hot ember trying to sear its way out of me.

It wasn't mine, but I could tap into it.

I could use it to tear down the walls of Reginand's domain and let the pieces of it rain down over his head. He would be powerless to stop me if I tapped into the arcana deep within me. Nothing would be able to stop me.

But that power didn't belong to me. It was Beryl's, and I'd seen what she'd done with it. The woman had a reign of blood and terror that I would never let into this world again, even if it meant denying a part of myself, even if it meant finding my way out of this nightmare world on my own two feet.

Unbothered by Reginand, I turned on my heel and set out to find Holden.

If I pushed aside the burning power trying to get out of me, I could feel a tether pulling me towards Holden. It grew stronger when I put my hand over the mating mark on my neck. Gratitude swelled in my chest like a bright light in the dark.

I'm on my way.

Holden

ONE MOMENT, I'd been behind Ivy. The next moment, I found myself surrounded by a dense wood filled with the laughing... *things*. Glimmers in the minimal light revealed strings pulling the laughing creatures. They were nothing but puppets, I realized. The Unseelie man's domain was all strung up on puppet strings that he was pulling at all times.

Things on strings were no match for the storm that raged inside me. The air crackled with unspent electricity as dark clouds gathered overhead. The ominous rumble of thunder would have put me at ease were it not for the distance between Ivy and myself.

My beast paced, digging its claws into my internal organs. It would soon tear into my heart and lungs if I didn't get a move on. It would be a repeat of the night at the Goblin Market all over again, but I wasn't particularly worried about the consequences here.

Would it be so bad if I laid waste to the Unseelie man's domain?

Not in the least.

Move. Go. Find her. Rescue our mate.

Thunder echoed the beast's demands booming in my head. My skull rattled. I fumbled forward when the beast threw itself

in a direction. I had to trust that the beast knew where to go. Each footstep had to lead me back to her.

There was no future without Ivy Rae.

The truth of the statement hit me like a spark that consumed my entire being. It was rare for a shifter to meet their mate so early in life. I'd gotten lucky and found her right away. We'd been side by side since childhood.

She'd been right under my nose the whole time. I'd thought that I would have to look everywhere else for a mate, so I hadn't been looking to *her*. That's why my beast was so upset. It wasn't that it needed a mate, but that I wasn't acknowledging the one that I had.

Maybe she didn't love me the same way, but I would gladly dedicate my life to her. I'd known her for so long and seen every possible side of her. There was no one else in this world who deserved my love and protection more.

"I'm coming," I said before unleashing my beast.

Great, black wings slapped the air and snapped the puppet strings piloting the creatures all around me. They crumpled to the ground as I took into the sky and let the soft storm clouds caress my scales.

An invisible tether pulled me forward. It brought me back to her.

Or, it would have had I not slammed into an invisible barrier. It was like the sky-box in a video game. I lashed out with my tail and hit a wall that didn't even shake upon impact. Rage made the clouds around me tremble.

Lightning burned the sky behind me, but it couldn't pass the barrier before me. Not even my storm clouds could. They stopped here, at the edge of the world with me. Somehow, the tether still tugged me in this direction.

If this was the edge of the world, then where was Ivy?

I didn't even have to step in-between to fall through worlds. This time, when I reached for the tether that guided me back to Holden, I took a step and the floor opened up. The tether couldn't save me from the free fall between worlds.

What is going on?

Somewhere above me, I heard Reginand's confused grunt. His hands appeared, fingers curling around the edge of the hole above. My heart leapt in fear, though I didn't know why. All I knew was that Reginand couldn't follow me.

If he did, then the world...no, *more than that*. Every world would be in trouble.

This wasn't about me or even about the mortal world anymore. If Reginand followed me, he would be able to get his greedy hands on the source of everything.

The arcana in my chest hummed in agreement, as if it were feeding me this information. How could it, though? It wasn't sentient. It was just the memory of a horrible woman...

Right?

I twisted as I fell and noticed the golden glow of something oddly familiar. If I reached out, I could pull myself into that golden world. I'd seen it once before, in passing. It'd revealed itself to me as I'd stepped in-between once before.

What was it? Why was it so important?

“Ivy!” Holden’s voice rippled the tether binding us together.

I twisted and snatched onto the invisible cord. Yanking, it ripped open a portal. Holden pulled his wings tight to his body and canted his head to drag his dragon body through the narrow tear between worlds.

Once free of the portal, he shot towards me, his great wings wide like a parachute as he caught me in his taloned hands.

Though I had Holden back, I knew that Reginand wasn’t far behind, and I couldn’t let that Unseelie bastard reach the source of magic ahead.

Craning my neck, I took stock of the tunnel that we fell through. It wasn’t a void, but more like a vertical hallway—a shaft made out of nothingness, if that could possibly make sense.

I caught sight of Reginand, crawling the wall of the shaft like a spider in search of prey. I shouted to Holden, but the wind around us whipped the words from my mouth.

How had Holden called out my name in his dragon form? I’d heard him clearly only to see a dragon come through the portal. Was there a way for us to communicate without speaking?

Holden wrapped his wings around us as we hit the floor of the shaft. When he peeled them away, golden light radiated over me. I held my hand over my eyes as a new tug hammered inside my chest.

Peering up, I saw the massive, white-barked tree and its glimmering leaves towering over us. Its branches reached up higher than I could see. They vanished into the ether, leading into other worlds, perhaps.

Immediately, I shot to my feet. I did my best to ignore the thunder happening in my chest. There were more important things than the quiver of my bones and the shallowness of my breath. My steps shaky, I searched for signs of Reginand.

We had to catch him before he touched the tree. That was all that mattered. I knew, deep down, that we shouldn't be here. This wasn't a place for us. We never should have had access to it.

The thunder in my chest grew louder. It came from the power that I'd been ignoring this whole time. It would erupt if I wasn't careful. Something about being this close to the tree set it off and made it more unstable than ever.

I could harness that, though.

"We need to find that creep," I told Holden. "And when we do, throw me at him."

Holden recoiled, his dragon head swinging wildly before he pinned me with a wide-eyed look.

"I'm a ticking time-bomb right now. It serves that man right to get hit with it." Though my heart pattered in fear at the thought.

I had no idea what would happen. The magical overflow was different every time. I only hoped that this time it would take us out of this world. I didn't care where we ended up. We could go to Hell, for all I cared. Aunt Vi could get me out later.

"I didn't realize that letting you carry the leaf of the world tree would let you lead me right back to it." The sound of gleeful surprise filled his voice with a musical lilt.

And it led me right to him.

I twisted towards him right as Holden grabbed me by the waist. Breath held, I tensed and prepared myself. My feet left the ground. The golden aura of the tree turned into a blur. The world shook when the power in my chest pulsed.

Perfect timing.

Holden

I SAW Ivy wrap her arms around the Unseelie man's neck and cling to him like a niece with her weird uncle. Barely a heartbeat later, the golden world around me vanished. My dragon claws touched mortal soil once again.

Both the tree and Ivy were gone. I tossed my head, unable to bear my frustration.

She'd asked me to throw her. I'd done exactly what she'd wanted. But she was gone, and I didn't know what to do without her.

The storm above turned dark, making the day seem like night. Thunder roared like the scream caught in my dragon throat. If I let it out, I'd unleash lightning that would destroy everything around me.

Swallowing it back worked, but only for a short while.

Ivy was missing. She wasn't next to me. I had to reach her or there would be no point in going on. Why run a Pack when my own life was hollow without my mate? I would never live up to anyone's expectations. The world around me would become a burden I had no interest in bearing.

Ivy was the only one who made this life worth anything.

Ragged, I shifted back and let the storm above me rage while I walked back to her apartment. The tether that bound us together, mate and mate, still held taut. I reached out for it with my human hand and caught nothing. I couldn't physically grab it and drag her back to me.

When I stepped into Ivy's apartment, the smell of her surrounded me. My chest ached, a physical pain tearing me in two. I took a tentative step forward, caught between staying and running out to find her.

I didn't know where to start but staying here to wait for her seemed pointless. I refused to be useless to my mate. If I wasn't out, searching for her, then I wasn't a mate worthy of her.

But the scent in the air grew stronger as I stepped deeper. The bond between us snapped tight and yanked me forward, towards the bedroom.

Ivy Rae was on the bed, her hands resting peacefully on her chest like someone had set her up there. I'd run with her in my arms, though. I'd physically lifted her and carried her out of the apartment. There was no way that she should have been here.

Fae magic worked in silly ways, though.

I stepped closer and touched the back of her soft hand with my rough fingers. She was warm and real under my hand. The dragon in me almost let out a triumphant roar.

This meant that she was still elsewhere, though. While her body sat before me, her mind had to be trapped in another realm with the Unseelie man. I couldn't delve into her dreams. My power was physical, in the here and now. My hands were useless, unable to help her at all.

My beast urged me to climb onto the bed. Though I didn't understand what it wanted of me, I couldn't help but obey its command. Careful not to disturb Ivy too much, I settled in around her so that the warmth of my body would reach hers. As badly as I wanted to pull her into my arms, I resisted and kept my hands clenched at my sides.

"I'm here with you," I whispered in her ear as I tucked her hair to the side. "I'm here."

Holden and I stood on separate sides of the room. I stared down into my drink and studied the face reflected in the liquid surface. When I'd jerked awake earlier, Holden looked so relieved he might kiss me.

I'd been unconscious for the better part of the day. To him, it must have seemed like forever. To me, it'd been mere moments since we'd parted in the dream realm. As soon as I'd thrown us out of the strange realm with the tree, I'd wrapped myself in a veil of dream magic.

A moment turned into hours.

I should have been relieved. I should have celebrated alongside him.

But my stomach rioted as memories of what I'd learned came rushing back to me. My vision filled with blood. No matter how I tried to shove it back, the memories remained. Guilt gnawed at my insides, leaving them raw.

Ever graceful as always, I'd thrown myself out of bed and away from him once again. Memories of blood and screams haunted me. I'd lurched into the bathroom to empty my already empty stomach—or so I'd told Holden.

Instead, I'd sat in the corner of the bathroom, hands clasped on the sides of my head while I warred with my rising guilt. When I looked at my palms, I didn't see my hands. I saw the one that'd been thrust into Mom's chest with the intention of ripping out her heart.

I don't deserve Holden's love.

As badly as it stung to agree with Holden's mom, she'd been right all along. The woman had been there and dealt with Beryl's evil ways firsthand. All of those horrible things had been *my* doing.

Now, Holden kept his distance while I swallowed my guilt. The room was quiet, but I could feel his confusion from here. He didn't have to say anything. It was written all across his face. I watched, out of the corner of my eye, as he would take a step towards me only to come up short and withdraw again.

Each time, he yanked his attention away from me and glared at the floor. This was for the best. I had to keep telling myself that. I could love him from a distance, but getting involved with him wouldn't be safe.

As much as I hated to admit it, *his mother was right.*

I hated agreeing with Ness. She was such a stick in the mud, such an absolute downer, too. But she knew where I'd come from and what the previous version of me had done. Things like that didn't deserve a second chance.

I threw back the last of my drink and set the mug down. "I think we know what the Unseelie man wants now."

"Hm?" Holden's response was barely more than a grunt, as if he couldn't get past the confusion in his own head to reply to me.

If we were going to get anywhere, we needed to address the dragon in the room. There was no way that we would be able to communicate otherwise. I could have told him to go home, but I wasn't ready to part with him yet, as selfish as that was. That meant I needed to be brutal.

"Listen," I said holding up a hand. "You don't have to worry about the mark. It'll heal in time. I know it was probably an accident. You don't owe me anything. I get it."

Holden stalked across the room. Head tilted he asked, "You get it?"

I shivered at the note rumbling in his voice. There was an ominous sound to the simple question that startled me. I stared up at him, my head suddenly losing all train of thought, as he leaned over me.

“Do you really get it?” He planted both hands on either side of me, trapping me between his arms as he came close enough for his warmth to slither over my thighs and up my torso.

I needed to put space between us, so he didn’t get hurt, but right now all I wanted was to get closer. I wanted to crawl into his arms and let him hold me until the world fell away and it was only us.

Heart thumping in my chest, I couldn’t bear the war between my desires and my caution. I swallowed hard and used that moment to fling myself in-between. I could have gone anywhere, could have put any amount of distance between Holden and myself.

Instead, I put myself on the other side of the room because the tether binding us together still held taught, and I couldn’t imagine being too far away from him. Eyes downcast, I stared at the floor while my mind spun.

This wasn’t what I should have been focused on right now. There were other matters at hand. While I didn’t get the idea that my life was at stake, my sanity and my magic were on the line—as was the safety of a tree that I didn’t quite understand yet.

Holden’s hands grazed my hips. When I didn’t pull away, he tugged me back into his chest. He buried his face in the crook of my neck, right above the mating mark, and breathed deep. I could feel the rumble of his hungry growl against my back, and it made me shiver with need.

I covered his hand with my own even though my intent had been to pull his hand away. Instead, I held him where he was and indulged in this closeness for a moment.

Leaning my head back on his shoulder, I said, “I’m going to hurt you someday.”

He ever so lightly bit down on my shoulder. I cried out at the wave of pleasure that rushed through my core. Arching my back, I wanted to writhe in the sensation, but Holden held me firm to his body.

“There’s only one way you can hurt me,” he said into my skin.

When his fingers dug possessively into my hips and waist, I could almost hear the words he’d left unsaid. According to Holden, leaving was the only way that I could hurt him.

He hadn’t seen what I had. Even the thoughts of those visions made me nauseous. It chased away the pleasure that Holden’s touch had conjured. I slumped in his arms and held back the bile trying to rise up my throat.

Holden spun me around. He cupped my cheek as he stared deep into my eyes. “It’s all right if you don’t love me back.”

My jaw dropped. The nausea vanished. I put both hands to Holden’s chest and shoved.

“Excuse me?” I shouted.

Perplexed, he held up both hands in surrender and watched me with wide eyes.

I stomped my foot, fists clenched at my sides. “It is *not* all right for you to give yourself over to someone who doesn’t love you. How dare you let yourself go to waste like that? Holden Callahan, you deserve everything!”

A slow smile spread across his face. He tongued his sharp canines as his eyes narrowed playfully.

“What?” I snapped.

He closed the distance with a single step. Bent knuckle tucked under my chin, he tilted my head back so that I had to look him in the eye. His smile remained unwavering. In fact, it seemed to glow with the knowledge he was hiding from me.

“What?” I pressed again.

Before I could stop him, he claimed my mouth. His lips pressed hard against mine, his canines gently biting and

begging. Without thinking, I opened for him. I couldn't help but pull him closer to me as his tongue parted my lips.

He delved deep into my mouth as if he couldn't get enough of the taste of me. I even heard a small, greedy groan in the back of his throat. The sound of it ignited a flame in me that made me wind my arms around his neck. He responded in kind, lifting me from the ground so that he could press me into the wall.

We melded together, our bodies fitting together so well it was as if we'd been made for each other...

Thoughts of the mating mark flitted through my mind.

There was a chance that we had been made for one another. A tether bound us so that no matter how far apart we were, we would always be able to find our way to one another. It was how I'd gotten out of the cursed dream. It was how I always returned to him.

"You love me," Holden whispered when he pulled back.

The sound of his voice made me nod even though I'd meant to hide it. I shouldn't have told him. There was no point in giving in to this because I knew I'd just hurt him someday.

Holden pressed a line of kisses along my cheek, my neck, my throat. I moved to give him better access against my better judgement. His lavish love made me feel as though I'd been lounging in the sun, refreshed and relaxed for the first time in ages.

I tightened my grip on him. I couldn't afford to lose him, not even to myself.

Of course, I loved him. He'd been right beside me this whole time, following me no matter where I went, no matter what I asked of him.

I couldn't let go. Fists tight, I held onto Holden like the whole world might crumble if I lost him. Still, I swallowed the nervous lump in my throat and tried not to give in to the fear lurking deep in the pit of my stomach.

It faded when he cupped my cheek, when he pressed a kiss to my forehead like this was what we'd always done even though it was still so new. He couldn't see the tears burning the backs of my eyelids. I made sure to turn away when I opened my eyes so he couldn't see how glassy they'd likely become.

Would this end in flames?

Couldn't I have just this one thing? This one place where I belonged? Even now, Beryl's legacy invaded my mind and hooked its claws into my current life.

This could end so badly, or it could be the greatest thing ever.

"Your mom is going to hate this," I whispered.

Holden

IVY HAD BEEN QUITE RIGHT, unfortunately. She accompanied me so that I could give Mom the plane ticket. There was no way I was getting on that plane now that I had my mate. With Ivy's hand in mine, I lifted my chin and dared my mother to say something.

Of course, she was the kind of woman to rise to the challenge. I should have known better.

"There's no way in any realm that I'm letting you date the reincarnation of the Unseelie Queen, Beryl." Mom put her hands on her hips and shook her head.

I blinked, shocked.

Queen Beryl? Reincarnation?

Ivy pulled her hand out of mine and crossed her arms over her chest. The way she dropped her head in shame told me that she'd known, and it ate at her. I could see her lower lip crushed between her teeth. If she bit down any harder, she'd hurt herself.

“Date?” I asked with a laugh.

Mom gestured at the two of us. “That’s what this is, isn’t it?”

I smiled wide, ready to drop a bomb on this conversation. “Ivy is my *mate*.”

Of course, Mom shook her head in denial. She waved a hand in the air again. “No. I get that you’re a young shifter and all, but you can’t let your hormones get the best of you. This is just silly. The two of you can’t be mates.”

Ivy fidgeted beside me. She put a hand over the mating mark on her neck.

“Okay, but you’re wrong,” I said. “I don’t see any point in lying to us like that, either. If you treat us like children who don’t know any better, then there’s no reason for us to keep coming back here.”

Mom’s face drained of all color. Her hair doubled in volume as static gathered in the air and lifted it in time with the rise of her brows.

I ducked my head, holding my ground.

This was a dumb conversation to be having. We didn’t need permission. There was no one in the world who could tell us that what we were doing was wrong. Mate bonds didn’t work that way. Mom could be upset with this new information, but that’s as far as she could take it.

“We have business to take care of,” I said, taking Ivy’s hand so that we could leave.

Mom sighed. Her voice turned pleading. “Does this information not bother either of you? Are you so far removed from the horror that you don’t understand what this means?”

“I know what it means.” Ivy spoke low, almost in a whisper.

My beast rose with a protective growl. Her tone sounded like a blade turned against her own self, and I hated hearing it. I would do anything to hear her laugh again, but it felt so far

away. This strong and sassy woman had been reduced to this scared demeanor.

“Mom,” I warned.

Ivy shook her head. “No, she’s right. It’s...it’s why I almost said no.”

Without another word, Ivy pulled her hand from mine and stepped in-between. She vanished leaving behind only her scent and empty air.

My beast slammed into me and rocked me forward. Pain lanced through my body, rattling my bones and teeth. Mom reached out to catch me, but I snarled at her. She just crossed her arms over her chest and scowled at me.

At least she wasn’t afraid of me.

“What the hell just happened in here?” Sawyer asked, half in and half out of the doorway like he might run any moment.

Mom sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. I rolled my eyes at her dramatics.

Dad appeared behind Sawyer. “I thought this might happen.”

“We never should have let them play as kids,” Mom grumbled.

“Like that would change anything. I fought our mate bond for weeks, and look at us now. There’s not a damned thing you can do to change the course of fate.” Dad pushed past Sawyer and stepped into the kitchen to cup the back of Mom’s head and kiss her forehead.

I’d always wanted what they had. Even if Mom was a bit bristly, Dad still loved her so gently. He treated her like she might break at any moment even though she’d died and come back to life twice, at least. He didn’t act like she needed to bear anything. He gladly did it for even if she could do it on her own.

I wanted to be that for Ivy. I wanted to hold her hand while she rushed headlong into danger. No matter where she went or what she did, I would love her just as gently.

“Oh shit, did Holden and Ivy finally bang?” Sawyer asked.

I spun and lunged at him.

Mom cried out. Dad said to just let us fight.

Somehow the biggest conversation of my life had turned into a normal day in the Callahan house.

I cursed Beryl for making what should have been one of the happiest days of my life a miserable slog. The woman that she'd been was dead and gone, and I stood in her place. I knew myself. I wasn't anything like her as far as I could see.

Yet, I let the idea of her wreck any sense of joy that I might have found in today.

The gentle waters of the river lapped at the sandy shore, creating a soft ambiance that filled the background of my internal monologue. The time for moping on the beach was over, though. If I stayed here any longer, Reginand would find me and drag me into his weird puppet domain all over again.

That was the last thing I wanted to do today.

I needed to find out what that tree was and why Reginand wanted it. It had something to do with Mom and her friends. The four of them had gone on wild adventures and endured insane trials. Whenever I asked about this specific thing, they all danced around the truth.

That made it kind of obvious. Whatever I was dealing with, it had to do with something they'd done.

Standing, I turned only to come up short.

Who did I ask about this? Could I go to the books and seek out the information? I wasn't really the nerdy sort. Reading was difficult for me because my attention span drifted way too easily. I could read the same line over and over, and still lose track of what it was trying to say.

I preferred to hear it directly from someone who knew.

So, I decided to pay a visit to the one with the loosest tongue.

Aunt Vi wasn't really my aunt. Uncle Morgan wasn't my uncle, either. I wasn't technically related to either, but when I arrived, I blew through the door like I lived there. Uncle Morgan looked up over the top of his book and raised a brow as I waved at him in passing. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Where's your other half?" he asked in his grumbling voice.

Uncle Morgan had always called Holden my other half, but the words suddenly had new meaning now that I knew Holden was my mate. It gave me pause and left me standing on shaky knees.

Instead of asking what he meant by that, I shrugged and shoved forward. My knees still wobbled, though. Had everyone else known all along? Had they planned for Holden to be my mate? That didn't seem possible. People couldn't just thrust mates together like that.

It was fate's decision.

Shaking myself, I stepped into the kitchen where Aunt Vi was flambeeing a pan of sugared bananas. The air smelled of brown sugar and bourbon as the flames tried to lick the ceiling.

"Uncle Morgan just lets you do anything, doesn't he?" I asked as I grabbed a stool and climbed atop it.

Aunt Vi snickered and grinned deviously over her shoulder. "Do you really think he has any say in what I do?"

I tilted my head. "You have a point."

She turned with the hot pan in hand and placed it on a trivet before spinning towards the freezer to pull out a gallon of vanilla ice-cream. Slamming the plastic container on the counter, she gave me an inquisitive look.

"Where's your other half?"

Again, the question struck me. I could feel the cold from Holden's absence on my arm and shoulder, like I was naked without him now that I knew we were mates. He was trapped with his family, though. While he argued for my sake, I'd walked away.

Because they were right.

"Oh, that is a *dismal* look," Vi said as she slid a bowl of ice-cream in front of me.

I shook myself, but I knew I couldn't quite break free of the gloom sitting over my head.

"Did you just find out?" Vi asked, knowingly. She leaned forward, both elbows on the counter and a spoon hovering in one hand. "About the whole Queen Beryl thing?"

The laugh that escaped me was bitter. I shook my head. "I've known about that for a long while now."

"Well, shit. Who leaked the information? Your mom has the tightest lips I've ever known. It couldn't have been her. If it was Ness, tell me, so I can go burn the Callahan house down. You know I wouldn't mind terrorizing the old besties."

A lump formed in my throat. It was starting to be a regular occurrence. This one was so large I didn't know if I could speak around it.

I realized there was another reason that I'd come here. I wasn't the only one in Lakesedge with power that came from a dark and dangerous source. Aunt Vi was only half human. Her father was Lucifer himself.

"How do you deal with the way people look at you when they know?"

Was this really what I should have been worried about right now? My personal feelings seemed kind of unimportant when I needed to keep Reginand at bay. Yet, I couldn't help myself. My emotions were overflowing, and I needed someone to help me rein them in, or they would eventually drown me.

Aunt Vi waved her spoon in the air. “I ignored them. I know me well enough to know that I’m never going to walk down that path again.”

“Again?”

Her gaze dropped to the bowl. She gestured towards the direction I’d come from earlier, towards where Uncle Morgan was. “He helped me get the fire under control. Before that...I had a few incidents that were less than good.”

I didn’t want to have incidents that were *less than good*. I wanted to show everyone that I wasn’t a threat. The power bursts weren’t my fault. They didn’t show my true intentions. They were like asthma attacks or seizures, a kind of condition that I was forced to live with against my will—not a display of my will.

Vi put a hand on my shoulder. “You have yours already.”

Lips twisted, I couldn’t agree with her. If I let myself stay too close to Holden, he would get hurt, and I would become exactly the kind of person that his mother warned him about. It sounded so cliché, but the reality of the situation was so much bigger than that.

Memories of Tal and the others being hurt by my own hands in another life flashed before my eyes. My stomach rolled. I gagged and choked back the bile trying to rise while my head turned light.

I gripped the counter to keep from passing out.

“Let Holden help you,” Aunt Vi said before digging her spoon into the bowl of flambeed bananas and ice-cream. “Those Callahan boys are really difficult to break. Mine has been burned so many times that I question why fate gave me a storm dragon and not a fire dragon.”

Uncle Morgan’s chuckle drifted into the room. He passed behind Aunt Vi and touched her lower back as he stepped around to claim the gallon of ice-cream for himself. “I bring rainstorms to put out the fires you start. It’s all about balance. I don’t mind a few burns here and there. Those are easy to heal; it’s the rest of the world we have to watch out for.”

“That is the most I’ve ever heard you speak in one setting,” I said, without thinking.

Aunt Vi burst out laughing. The room fell silent when the front door opened and two more entered the house. At first, fear made cold chills clamber up my spine. Then I realized it wasn’t Reginand, but Holden and Sawyer.

Sawyer had a black-eye that looked as though it was already healing. He flashed me a wink when he stepped into the kitchen, a gesture that earned him another punch from Holden. Sawyer staggered, but his laugh filled the air and eased the growing tension that’d been gripping me.

When Holden and I locked eyes, the rest of my tension bled away. I relaxed so much that I nearly fell off my stool. He stepped up behind me, his chest to my back like the distance between us had been too much to bear, and now he needed to touch me.

I tilted my head back to look up at him. “How did you know I was here?”

Holden said nothing, only gave me a knowing smile and a tug on the mate bond between us. That little tug sparked a flame in my core that made my eyes wide and my cheeks hot. I shoved a spoonful of ice-cream into my mouth and prayed that it would cool the sudden fire trying to consume me.

“What’s this I hear about little Ivy Rae being the seed of all evil?” Sawyer asked. “I know she can be a menace, but she’s not maniacally evil or anything.”

He ruffled my hair then gestured to me as if to say *see, she didn’t kill me!* It would have made me laugh if I hadn’t witnessed the things Beryl did with our hands. Because we were one and the same, weren’t we? Beryl and I?

The room grew quiet. I could feel people watching me, but I kept my gaze downcast. Holden tried to comfort me with a hand on my shoulder, but I shrugged it off. I didn’t deserve comfort after what I’d done, even if it had been in another life.

I definitely didn’t deserve him, either.

Fate had dealt him a cruel hand, giving him me as a mate. It hadn't been fair to him in the least. What had Beryl ever done in her life to deserve someone like him? He was kind and patient and willing to put up with so much bullshit. She hadn't earned him, and I found it difficult to believe that I'd managed to change anything in the two decades I'd been alive.

How could I if Beryl and I were the same person?

Aunt Vi slammed her bowl down. Everyone in the room jumped at the sudden cacophony.

"You are not Beryl," Vi declared.

Her eyes flashed red, her lips a straight and determined line as she pointed a finger at me.

"Do you hear me?" she asked. "You are not Beryl. I have known you your whole life, and not once have I seen any indication that you are anything like her. Your mother knew that if Beryl was given a different opportunity, if she was given a chance to be loved the way everyone should be loved, that she would turn out differently...she would turn out like you, loving and strong and capable of so much."

This time, when I swallowed the lump in my throat, it tasted sweet. I blinked back tears that I didn't think I deserved. I turned my head away, like I could escape this kindness if I simply didn't look.

"Did your mother make the wrong choice?" Vi challenged. "Do you think that Cerridwen James is capable of making a bad decision? Certainly not in my lifetime. Out of all of us, she's the smartest. That woman is not capable of making a bad decision."

That was yet to be seen. "Just because I haven't done anything bad yet doesn't mean I'm not capable of it."

Behind me, Holden growled. He grabbed my stool and spun it. The world blurred, watching faces becoming nothing more than smears in my vision until Holden stopped me so that I was facing him.

"I don't love you because some twist of fate demanded it of me. I love you because of who you are, a person that I've

had twenty years to get to know. Do you think that I would have some false idea of you after that long? That I wouldn't be able to see the horrible side of you at some point?

"I love you because you are you, not anyone else."

"This is going to be a massive shift in power," Uncle Morgan said quietly in the background.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from Holden's, though. I searched his eyes for any opening I could find. There had to be some sort of gap in his logic. If only I could find it and tear it open, then I'd be able to show him how foolish this decision was.

He remained steadfast, though. Holden gave me no opening, because there wasn't one. Throughout my entire life, he'd been the one person to truly know me. He'd been beside me through everything. There was so little that I kept from him, things that seemed silly compared to the trial we endured now.

I cleared my throat, unable to talk about any of this in front of friends and family now. My cheeks burned as desire for Holden rolled through my body and mind. I had to duck my head to hide the color on my face.

"Anyway," I said. "I came here for a different reason."

Aunt Vi helped us put together the pieces of the puzzle that she and her friends had created two decades ago. When I mentioned a giant white tree in a weird realm, she'd directed me back to Addie.

Holden seemed reluctant to pay her a visit again, but he agreed to accompany me, nonetheless. When he and I clasped hands, Sawyer called out.

“Hey! You were my ride here!”

“Walk home,” Holden grumbled as we stepped in-between.

Teleportation magic was so nifty. It sucked that Sawyer couldn't use it.

“What did he do?” I asked under my breath when we appeared on Addie's porch.

Holden's lip curled in a sneer. “Don't worry about it. He was just being vulgar. I beat it out of him.”

I wanted to ask about his mother, too, but I knew that was a can of worms that could wait for later. There was no point in poking that beast right now—not when the scent of rot hung behind me like an omen of horrible things waiting to happen.

I glanced back into the night and wondered if Reginand was waiting somewhere in the shadows. His gaze made my skin feel oily—it was the only way I knew that he was out there. He must have expected me to lead him back to that tree again.

When Maddox opened the door to let us inside—I didn't dare enter this house without invitation, both Addie and Maddox kind of scared me sometimes—he narrowed his eyes at the shadows in the woods beyond like he could tell someone out there was watching.

I almost told Maddox what was happening in that moment. If anyone could deal with this mess, it would be him. But then word would get around to my parents, and Dad would lock me up in a tower never to be seen again like some cursed fairy tale princess.

I could stand my ground and tell him that there was no way he could keep me locked up, even for my own safety. Holden could come in and rescue me like a knight. How well would that go over? Probably about as well as a cold front over Hell.

This time, when Addie caught sight of us, her gaze caught on me as she froze. She licked her lips slowly like she knew what was coming. It told me that she'd known all along.

I threw my hands in the air. "Stop hiding everything from me! I've known about Beryl for most of my life. What else are you all keeping from me?"

Maddox growled at my sass, but I served him a glare that made the magic locked away in my chest flare hot. The arcana pulsed and threatened to overflow.

Addie held up her hands. "It's all right. I know what it's like to be in her shoes."

The words caught me off guard. I slowly turned towards her once more, confusion parting my lips.

"You're not fae or a reincarnation," I spat.

Holden put a hand on my shoulder. It warned me that I was coming undone. My attitude was unjustly aimed towards Addie when I should have taken it and shoved it at Reginand for the ways he'd been tormenting me.

Addie pulled something from her pocket and began fiddling with it nervously. I glimpsed the flash of black beads and bone shards. Addie's magic gave me the creeps. It was the

direct opposite of Mom's power. While Mom told me stories of how the two of them had used that opposition to tear curses in half, it didn't quite put me at ease.

"The story of how you were born is a long one," Addie said finally.

"I mean...I already know about that." I waved my hand in the air.

Holden made a sound of confusion so I turned to him.

"It's why your mom hates me; she said it earlier. I'm the reincarnation of a woman who tormented both of our parents." The memory of Beryl's hand embedded in Mom's chest made me shudder. "I don't know why Mom brought me back, but everyone is afraid I'll become just like the woman I used to be."

It sounded so silly saying it out loud. The story didn't quite feel real, which made me not feel real. I wrapped my arms around myself and fought back the unnerving sensation trying to overtake me.

"There's a bit more to the story than that." When Addie spoke, a golden glow emanated from behind her.

My breath rushed out of me as I gaped at the portal opening behind her. Without thinking, I rushed up and grabbed her arm.

"Close it," I whispered, rushed.

Alarmed, Addie's eyes shot wide. The portal behind her collapsed.

"What's going on?" she asked between us.

I pressed my lips into a firm line before silently shaking my head. "Nothing."

Though I wanted to run for the door and put as much space between me and that portal before Reginand found it, I knew that I had to stay to get the answers that I needed.

Holden

WATCHING Ivy fall apart pained me. She glanced over her shoulder at the dark window that refused to reveal what could have been lurking outside. The smell of that Unseelie man lingered on the air, telling me that he wasn't far behind.

He was nearby, waiting for another opportunity to strike. That, or he was waiting for something else. I realized Ivy and I hadn't had the chance to talk about much. A lot had happened, and I was just a shadow behind her in this story.

My beast told me that was all right. I could be a background character in Ivy's story, but I couldn't help but feel like I was being pushed away still. Would there be a moment when we could discuss everything happening? When I could ask Ivy to let me in again? She still held me at a distance when I'd made it very clear that I would follow her to the ends of the earth.

I grumbled and ducked my head before pushing into the kitchen. In there, I paced while the others talked. Of course, Maddox followed me.

"Don't worry about me anymore," I told him.

He gave a knowing half-smile. "I'm not. I just thought the company of a packmate would be nice."

Though the gesture did ease the anxious energy crackling in my beast, I knew that Maddox had ulterior motives. He wasn't just a packmate. He was also the best murder detective in all of Upstate New York.

The man thought that he could get some answers out of me. Maybe it was good that I didn't know much of what was going on then. Maddox could pry all he wanted, but I wouldn't be able to tell him anything.

Scratching the back of my head, I laughed. "You can try all you want."

"Try what?" He remained nonchalant, but he wasn't fooling anyone.

The more we pressed for answers, the more they would ask questions in return. Ivy wanted to do this on her own. I could tell that much. If we were to step into roles of leadership in the future, shouldn't we be able to deal with this?

"We have it under control," I said.

That was a mistake.

Maddox canted his head questioningly.

Before he could ask anything else, the smell of rot bloomed in the house. Maddox's head shot up. He sniffed the air. I rushed past him and ran over to Ivy.

It seemed that we could no longer hide what was happening.

"Reginand, you son of a bitch," Ivy muttered under her breath. "I'm going to cut your stupid little puppet strings."

"Who?" Addie asked, hand over her mouth and nose. Her eyes widened with recognition.

The anxious energy that'd had nowhere to go earlier now focused. I had an enemy to defeat now.

Addie grabbed Ivy's sleeve. "Don't go anywhere. I think we have a lot to discuss."

Before anyone could move, Addie marched over to the front door and opened it as if it were a casual Sunday morning and she needed to get her newspaper from the mailbox. I caught a glimpse of a string of beads in her hand. An eerie glow emanated from the depths of the black beads as she stepped into the dark.

Maddox groaned and went to follow his wife. The hair on my arms stood on end as he passed. My beast stirred and growled at the sensation like it was an attack on me. I'd never seen either of their arcana in action, and I was getting the sense that I didn't want to.

"Why are they so creepy?" Ivy whispered under her breath.

These were old family friends. I felt bad saying anything about their arcanas. It didn't seem right, especially while they went out to frighten the Unseelie man away.

“Should we leave?” I asked.

Stepping in-between would distract the Unseelie man. We would pull his attention away from Maddox and Addie.

Ivy lifted her chin. “No. I need answers. And...I need help.”

A knot in my chest unraveled. Truth be told, I hadn't been looking forward to dealing with any of this on our own. We had so many connections between here and Lakesedge that it seemed foolish to try to face this man by ourselves.

We had the strength to defeat him. I was sure of it. We didn't have all the pieces of this puzzle, though.

I'd been distracted by my mother's anger earlier and missed what she'd said about Ivy's true identity—could I even call it that? I'd heard of Beryl, but it'd never occurred to me that Ivy and Beryl could be the same person.

The sound of grinding bones and tumbling rocks outside shoved through my thoughts and gave me pause. Ivy and I shared a glance. She shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself as the air turned chill and vacuous.

Still, her gaze returned to the open door as her lips twisted with doubt.

“They won't be enough to stop him. Will they?” I hated asking the question aloud, as if it might give this man more power.

Ivy shook her head. “He's a fae creation. Not only is he strong enough to have his own domain, but he denounced his creator and struck out as an autonomous being. When they went outside, he probably dipped into his domain to chill for a bit. He'll be back soon, and he'll be after whatever it is he thinks I took.”

If this Unseelie man was stronger than the people who changed the power structure of Lakesedge, then could we

really handle him?

Ivy swallowed audibly. I reached over and took her hand.

With my mate in my life now, I could do anything.

It seemed as though Addie and Maddox had scared Reginand off, but I didn't know how long that would last. He would return, especially now that he knew Addie could open the door to that golden domain with the tree.

"What is that?" I asked after she and Maddox returned. "That tree. What is it?"

Addie locked eyes with me. Her expression told me I wasn't going to like this answer. "It's the reason you're alive."

And she was right.

"What the hell does that mean?" Holden asked, his hand still in mine.

Addie put her fingertips together. "So, I might have stolen something important from the Goblin Market."

I tightened my grip on Holden's hand as rage unfurled through me. "You stole something from him? Then why is he hounding me? He can be your problem for all I care. I'm tired of everyone else's expectations holding me back."

Well, that was more of a slip of the tongue than I'd wanted. The words came rushing out even though they had little to do with what I'd been talking about. Still, this was exhausting.

I recalled the look Vi had given me at the café when I'd accidentally hit Holden in my panic. I couldn't escape the way Ness had held her ground when we tried to tell her that Holden and I were mates.

Now, something Addie did before I'd been born had somehow become my problem.

"I'm tired of living in everyone's shadow! If I'm not in your guys' shadow, then I'm in Beryl's. I left to go to college so I could be my own person there, and it's even lonelier than being here. Now that Holden and I are mates, it feels like I can't even enjoy that without something from the past coming up to poke a hole in that, too." I flung my hands in the air as all of my pent-up rage left me.

It woke the seed of arcana that I'd been keeping shoved down. A wave of power erupted from me before I could even try to pull it back. Holden rushed forward and swept me up so that he might take the brunt of my outburst, but I wasn't going to hurt him again.

This power was mine, as everyone else liked to think, so I wasn't going to let it get the best of me. The wave unfurled, but I shoved my will into it before it could take shape. Flowers of all sorts burst forward, each one a deep violet with a red tinge at the petal tips.

Then, Addie had the audacity to turn my world upside down again.

She smiled, knowingly, as she took in the flowers. "At least, your outbursts are a lot prettier than mine were. I just resurrected dead things by accident."

The words confused me. They didn't quite mean anything to me...not yet, at least. I got the sense that whatever she knew would change everything.

"Before you were created, I found a leaf from the world tree in the Goblin Market. I knew what it looked like, what it felt like, because I'd had one inside me, too. When I took it from the vendor at the Market, I intended to put it back on the world tree, just like I'd done with the leaf that'd been inside me." Addie ran her black beads through her fingers once more.

"What does that have to do with Ivy?" Holden asked as he took a protective step towards me.

My heart hammered inside my chest. I was close to the truth, so close I could taste it. Reginand would be coming back any minute. I needed Addie to spill the beans now. If she didn't...

“When Beryl died, your mother asked me for the leaf because it would have enough magic to give Beryl a second chance at life. That means you are the vessel for that leaf, even now.” Addie’s brow furrowed slightly. She looked to the door, perhaps thinking of the man outside. “He wants that leaf back. I’m so sorry that the consequences of my actions are biting you in the ass.”

I stood there, digesting everything she’d said. It took a long while as my mind spun, trying to weave those words into a tapestry that made sense. Finally, I realized that if Addie hadn’t done any of that, then I wouldn’t be here.

Was...was that a good thing or a bad thing? Mom believed she’d done the right thing in bringing me into this world. When I looked to Holden, everything felt right.

However, I couldn’t help but worry that it would still blow up in our faces. At my core, wasn’t I just Beryl? Wouldn’t I succumb to her magic?

The source of arcana that I’d been keeping at bay wasn’t Beryl’s magic, though. It was this leaf that Addie had stolen. I hadn’t been fighting off Beryl’s influence this whole time.

That meant...

“I’m just me...”

Everyone shared a look, like they had no idea what was going on. Honestly, I barely had any idea of what was happening in my own mind, either. The pieces of a two-decade-old puzzle were starting to come together, but they were dusty and faded and—

“I’m not actually Beryl!” I shouted.

Holden cocked his head. “No shit.”

I spun on him and playfully punched him in the chest. He grabbed my wrist and pulled me into his body, wrapping his

other arm around my lower back.

“I love you for you, idiot.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead.

This meant that I could love him. I no longer had to fear that someday Beryl would take over and shape me into a vision of her. This magic wasn't a ticking time bomb waiting to make me evil.

I sighed happily and let my head fall against his chest. Everything I'd feared had been laid to rest. I didn't have to worry that Holden's mate would come along and steal him from me. I no longer had to fight back fears of becoming someone I wasn't.

The weight that left my shoulders left me feeling so light I could float to the moon.

That didn't last long, though. Reginand would be coming back.

I peeled away from the security of Holden's chest and turned to Addie. “Do I just give the leaf back to Reginand?”

That seemed wrong. I hated the idea of this much power in his grasp. He'd had it for sale, or at least that was the implication, but I couldn't help but wonder if he hadn't known the true power of it until now.

“I took it from him for a reason,” Addie said. “Now, we keep you safe until we deal with this man. There is one other option, but I'm not entirely sure how it will pan out, and I don't want your mom kicking my ass all the way to Hell if you get hurt.”

Holden growled. Maddox's growl joined in. I knew both would fight tooth and nail to make sure we all stayed safe. They would kill Reginand if that's what it came down to.

However, Addie's mention of another option piqued my interest.

She didn't seem to want to explain at first. Her lips flattened into a grim line. She shook her head like it couldn't be an option at all.

“Then why bring it up?”

Addie’s attention flicked to Holden for the briefest moment. When she beckoned me out of the room, I almost didn’t go with her. Curiosity got the best of me, and I followed Addie far enough away so that neither shifter could hear her when she spoke.

“I’ll tell you this here, so that you can make a decision on your own.”

A plan had been created. For it to work, I couldn't stay in the safety of Addie and Maddox's home. We had to head back to my apartment, where Reginand would feel safe to strike.

Holden gave me a questioning look because I hadn't told him what Addie had to say in private. No, that sat like a lump in the pit of my stomach.

Instead, I cupped Holden's face in both hands and kissed him like this might be our last night together. If he felt the urgency in my lips, he didn't say anything about it. Instead, he wrapped his arms around me and responded in kind, holding me so close that we could have melted into one.

He lifted me from the ground and carried me over to the couch where he gently set me down before covering me with his own body. We had no idea when Reginand would strike next, but I hoped that the old fae man would be embarrassed enough to leave us be while we had one last moment together.

I knew what I had to do next, and there was a chance that it would be the end of me. Maybe even Reginand was kind enough to give me these last few hours, because what he wanted very well could be the end of me, too.

There was no point in wasting these hours thinking of what could be when I had a hot shifter man between my legs and his lips on my throat. Holden kissed the mating mark which brought sparks crackling through my body.

I inhaled sharply and arched into him. When he ever so lightly bit down over the mating mark, I cried out and bucked. He growled happily, a bit of a laugh coming through. Before I could do anything, he bit down harder. He didn't break skin, but the sensation that his teeth sparked nearly burned me from the inside out.

"I can't believe I was afraid of this," I breathed, my hands fisted in the back of his shirt.

It would come off soon. The fabric deserved to be on the floor so I could feel the muscled expanse of his full back.

Holden captured my mouth with his. He pressed his tongue far past my own, filling my mouth with the taste of him. There was more that he could fill, but I didn't have the ability to tell him in this state.

When he pulled back, I smoothed his hair away from his face. "I was afraid someone else would come along and be your true mate. So, I tried not to have feelings for you. I tried to be your friend and nothing else."

Holden pulled back, bracing his weight on his forearms. The way his gaze travelled down my face as if studying every part of me so he could commit it to memory made me think that perhaps he knew what might come next.

But his words said the opposite.

"You're mine now, and I'm never letting you out of my sight. No matter what comes next, I'll be there. It is the only thing my beast wants. Without you..."

I thought of the night at the Goblin Market, how his beast had rioted without me. That really should have been a sign that our fates were tied together. Now, all I could think about was what might happen to Holden if I were no longer here.

It wasn't that I *wanted* to leave. In fact, I wanted to drop out of college and move home to be with Holden. Being apart from him would break us both. If I moved back home, then I would have all the time in the world to figure out who I really wanted to be outside of Beryl's shadow.

If I survived.

Holden must have sensed my distraction because he bent his head and bit my neck again. My body burst with sensation as if he were deep inside me. This should have been awkward after knowing each other as friends for so long, but this seemed natural. Fate knew that we both needed a reprieve, and that it would be easy to find together.

I yanked his shirt over his head and threw it to the floor so I could run my hands down his chest. The soft layer of hair over his pecs entranced me until he reached down and slid his hand up the inside of my leg. I wanted to savor touching every part of him that I'd only ever been able to appreciate from afar before, but his touch scrambled my thoughts.

When he lazily dragged the tips of his fingers over the folds between my legs, I let out a shuddering breath from the ripples of sensation that he managed to conjure. It was the barest of touches, but it made me wonder just how good it might feel to have him fully inside me.

“Is it rushing...would we be moving too fast if I wanted to...to make love tonight?” I tripped over my words, unsure of how I should phrase this in such a new situation.

He growled, and his eyes flashed bright with the light of his beast. The air charged with unspent electricity as if his need could barely be contained within his body.

And yet, he still said, “Only if you're ready.”

Those magic words worked better than any dirty phrases ever could.

I gently pushed him back and wriggled out of my pants, throwing them to the floor to be forgotten. Maybe I would miss them later, if Reginand struck, but he was barely a thought in the back of my mind.

There was no room for anything else in my mind when Holden's body pressed against mine. He ran his hand down my waist like he needed to commit every dip and curve of my body to memory. His body trembled as if stricken by a need that he had to hold back. The growl that rumbled through him vibrated my body and brought a soft moan out of me.

Holden nuzzled my neck. “I need you. Everything in me wants me to flip you over and take you like a beast, but I’m doing my best to control myself. You deserve more than a beast.”

Reaching up, I fisted my hand in his hair so I could pull him close and whisper in his ear. “What if I want a beast?”

A snarl ripped from him and caught fire in my chest. I barely had time to breathe before he took me by the hip and flipped me over. Face down into the couch cushions, I could feel nothing other than the solid length of him against my backside. Warmth spilled out between my legs.

When the scent of my need hit the air, Holden let out a beastly growl. I, unable to stop myself, lifted my hips and wiggled my butt in the air. It was enough to send him over the edge.

He reached between my legs and slid two fingers inside me without warning. I cried out, my head back. He put a hand to my shoulder to keep me in place while he pulled the other out. When I glanced back, I found the two fingers in his mouth and his eyes alight with a furious need.

We locked gazes as he sucked the taste of me clean off his fingers. A wicked smile unlike any other reached his lips and made me want to kiss them all over again. This was a side of him that I’d never seen before, and it was all for me.

He positioned the head of his cock at my opening. For a moment, I feared I wouldn’t be able to take it. Yet, when he slammed home inside me like the impatient beast he’d become, my body stretched and molded to fit around him without hesitation. I breathed a pleased sigh and let my face fall into the couch cushion.

Even though Holden’s beast was nearly in control, he managed to keep a steady and easy rhythm with his strokes—at first. The slow build up of pressure deep in my core made me sigh into the couch cushions. But his strokes soon took on the frantic need of the beast that must have been waiting forever to claim me.

How often had this exact scene crossed Holden's mind? How often had I stretched in front of him only to fill his head with lusty thoughts? I savored the idea that I'd been tormenting him this whole time. Each hard thrust was payback for the build-up of his desperate need for me.

I thought he might climax before me, but the heavy weight of the building pressure in my core threatened to spill over at any moment. I bit the couch cushion while his hand dug into my shoulder, right next to the mating mark.

More and more, his cock kissed the sweet spot deep inside my body. I thought I might burst into flames. Already, my magic spilled out of me because there was nowhere else for it to go. Bright flowers sprawled out from where we made fervent love. Pale pink and white blossoms opened like a womanhood spreading for the first time.

"Mine," Holden growled. "You're *mine*."

"Yours." As the words left my lips, the dam of pleasure in me broke and spilled in all directions. "*Yours!*"

My head spun as sensation rippled from my core to my toes to my fingers to my head. I dug my nails into the couch in a desperate attempt to hold on before this sea of pleasure swept me far, far away from Holden.

He held onto me, too. He bucked one last time, both hands gripping my hips so tight that his claws nearly pierced my skin. The hot warmth of his seed spilled into me, reigniting the fire of desire all over again.

I buried my face and tried to fight back the need to go again so quickly. I couldn't get enough of him. He was an addiction. If my life was to end soon, I wanted to spend the next several days with him buried hilt-deep inside me, in every position, in so many holes that no one would look at me the same way again.

But we didn't have the time.

I swallowed and tried to get ahold of myself. Holden had other ideas. Before I could collect myself, he turned me over again. This time, he put my legs over his shoulders and raised

my hips. When he buried himself in me again, his eyes roved over my body. He slid his beastly hands down my stomach and back up again.

His attention caught on the bounce of my breasts. A hungry light filled his eyes as a grin split across his face. He took one in his hand and ever so carefully ran his taloned thumb over the nipple.

Even though his beast had its claws in him, he remained careful. He held me, gripped me, fucked me—all so lovingly.

I couldn't help it when my eyes rolled back in my head. The pleasure was more than I could take. I thought I might catch fire and burn the couch beneath us. It was hard to believe this could be possible.

How could I feel so much so quickly again? How could he stay so hard for so long?

A hot mess dampened the insides of my thighs. The smell of our lovemaking filled the air with a musky scent. The mess we made might leave a stain on the couch, but I didn't know if I would live long enough to care.

I was alive in the here and now, and Holden was all I cared about.

He bent over me and took one of my breasts into his mouth. At first, he was careful, stoking pleasure out of the sensitive nub that was my nipple. But his strokes became frenzied again, and his teeth grazed my skin with renewed urgency.

Warmth bloomed in my chest. My breath shuddered on my lips and left me wordless. I dragged my nails along his back and bit my lip to keep from begging him to finish me once more.

He read my mind, though. His hand slid between us, his thumb finding that small bead on the outside that he could stroke to completion. Just as my own pleasure broke in a wave of cool chills, he bucked and spilled into me once again.

The hot and cold mingled, leaving me shuddering beneath him as he collapsed, drained.

We would need to get up and get ready to fight soon, but there didn't seem to be much of a reason to do anything in that moment. The world was quiet save for our labored breathing. I ran a hand along the back of his head as he rested it on my chest.

"I didn't realize how much I needed you," Holden said into my skin.

Not how much he needed sex, to be released, or anything like that. He said he didn't realize how much he'd needed *me*.

My heart did little backflips in my chest. I licked my lips and tried to find the right words, but there were none that truly conveyed the joy I felt in this moment. I'd always found peace with him. He'd never looked at me like I could become someone else at any moment.

Now that he knew, he still only saw me. It made me truly feel as though Beryl was a thing of the past. She would never come back, never take me over and turn me against those I loved.

For the first time, it felt safe to love him in return.

I just needed to survive the next twelve hours.

Holden carried me to the shower where he preheated the water while I waited on the edge of the sink. This could be our life, making love and sharing a shower together every night. There was a bright future with so much time to figure out all the other questions about life.

The water wasn't quite as hot as I expected when I thought about what could happen next.

Turning to Holden, I said, "You know I love you. Right?"

He scowled down at me, his eyes narrowing. "Don't phrase it like that ever again."

Taken aback, I recoiled.

He cupped my chin in his hand and pressed a soft kiss to my mouth. I stood there, stunned and confused.

“Don’t ever sound like you’re going to leave me again,” he growled into my mouth.

I almost laughed with relief, but I couldn’t quite feel it with the mounting apprehension taking up presence in the pit of my stomach. I didn’t want to leave him. Quite the opposite.

However, we didn’t know what would happen when I returned the leaf of the world tree, Yggdrasil, to its true place.

Holden

IVY HAD BEEN distant since getting dressed. Before that, even, she’d seemed to retreat. Her eyes refused to reach mine, and her lower lip lived between her teeth at this point. I knew that she and Addie had discussed something important, and it was sitting on her mind.

The two of them had slipped away to talk in private earlier. Addie had even turned on the radio to jumble anything I might overhear. When I’d pushed to follow, Maddox had stood in my way. I’d tried to use my dominant presence to force obedience from him, but there wasn’t a submissive bone in that man’s entire body.

At least, when it came to the Pack.

I didn’t want to think about what he and his wife got up to. There were more important things going on.

Now, I listened as Ivy laid out the plan at hand. She hefted a box with an arrow nestled inside it. The arrow had been fashioned out of the same splinter of glass that’d pricked Ivy’s finger not that long ago.

“You have to hit Reginand with this,” Ivy said, lifting the arrow from the box.

I raised a brow. “You want me to fire an *arrow* at him? Why can’t I just attack him as a dragon?”

Ivy scowled. “Because I don’t want you getting hurt. Dummy.”

“What if I make a promise not to get hurt? One that I will keep forever.”

“You can’t promise something like that. Who knows what the future will look like? You can’t tell me there won’t be other fights, that they won’t be difficult.”

That solidified it for me. She knew something that I didn’t, and she was trying to protect me from it. I wanted to push, but I respected Ivy’s boundaries. Maybe she wasn’t really protecting me, but her intentions spoke louder than her words—the ones she wasn’t saying.

I huffed a breath out my nose and accepted the enchanted arrow. “All right. So, arrow.”

She awkwardly lifted a bow for the arrow and held it in front of me, like even she knew that this was an odd request. “Fire it at him before he can get too close to you. It should send him into the same kind of cursed sleep that he put me in. Addie put her own spin on it to keep him out of Yggdrasil’s domain. We need him to be out of it just long enough so that we can do what needs to be done there.”

“And what happens when you finish there and return without what he wants? What then? He’s going to wake up and be angry.”

Ivy pulled in a shaky breath and lifted her gaze to meet mine. The arch in the center of her brows told me that she didn’t exactly like what she had to say next. “Then we hand him over to the fae court.”

I mentally double checked what that meant before speaking. “So, we’re going to tie him up and give him to your parents?”

“That’s the right thing to do, even if I don’t want to get them involved. Mom and Dad are the ones who should pass judgement on him. Not us.”

I tongued my canine as I fought back the murderous thoughts dancing through my mind. My beast wanted blood. Reginand, this Unseelie man, had been tormenting my mate

for days now. He'd been hunting her like prey, and I wanted to put an end to it with my own two hands.

Instead of arguing, I nodded. At the end of the day, Ivy was right. It wasn't our place to deliver what we considered justice. That duty belonged to others, for now. I, honestly, didn't want that kind of responsibility yet, even if my beast longed for a fight.

Justice and payback were two very different things.

So, I nodded.

The plan was set. I would do my damndest to fire this arrow at Reginand when he tried to follow Ivy into this Norse domain.

"Do you realize how weird this all is? And we were raised in the heart of the supernatural community. We should be used to weird, but this is a whole other level of *what the fuck*," I said, hefting the arrow in my hand.

If I couldn't hit him from a distance, I would stab it into his body.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I knew who it would be again. Without looking, I reached into my pocket and turned the phone off. I wouldn't need it going forward tonight.

Though Dad and Sawyer had been able to defuse Mom's anger after our last conversation, Mom's stance on my mate bond hadn't changed. My phone had not stopped blowing up since I'd left to catch up with Ivy. Even in Addie and Maddox's living room, Maddox and I had listened to the soft vibration of message after message bombarding my phone.

I should have turned it off then.

"Are you ready?" Ivy asked, breaking me free of my thoughts.

Sighing, I said, "Ready as I can be. Let's set everything right again."

I reached for my mate, this weird little fae princess who had been an evil queen in a past life. There was no evidence of who she'd been, not even in the violet glow of her eyes.

Instead, I saw only Ivy Rae, determined to be her own person no matter what the past might dictate.

Cupping her cheek, I pulled her close for one more kiss. I didn't dare call it *one last kiss* because tonight would go smoothly. Even if it was an odd plan, I knew we'd all make it out.

What could go wrong?

But the way Ivy kissed back held a sense of urgency, as if she thought she might never be able to kiss me again. Her teeth tugged at my lips. I pressed deeper, trying to comfort her the best I could. She curled her hand into a fist, holding my shirt tight.

"I'll be all right," I whispered into her lips.

Holden would do just fine. I had no doubt about that. Even if I hated leaving him alone to deal with things, I trusted that he could handle himself. He'd never let me down before.

Pulling the magic of the in-between around myself, I spared one last glance at my mate and best friend. He tried to give me a reassuring smile, but I saw the flicker of confusion in his eyes. At the very last second, Holden understood why I was afraid.

The smell of rot drifted towards us. The floor creaked, warning us of incoming steps. I caught a flash of shadow out of the corner of my eye, sparking memories of the first time Reginand had introduced himself.

It was too late, though. I stepped in-between and flung myself into Yggdrasil's domain. Reginand would try to follow, and that's when Holden needed to strike.

Meanwhile, I had something I needed to do. I was thankful that Reginand would keep Holden busy. It was a bittersweet kind of gratitude. I wished Holden didn't have to deal with any of this. I wished I could have kept him in the dark about everything—that way he wouldn't have to worry about a thing while I did what I had to do.

Addie had explained to me that each leaf on Yggdrasil contained an entire world. There was a plethora of worlds besides our own, and each one needed to be attached to the world tree. Should a leaf be plucked from it, the world would

cease to exist. It would become nothing more than a vessel of immense power.

She'd had one hidden inside herself, placed there by the immortal goddess Hel when trying to stop Fenrir from devouring everything. Now, Reginand wanted to be like Fenrir. He wanted to rip all the leaves from the world tree and use them as batteries—killing millions in the process.

What was the death of one compared to the safety of millions?

My mouth tasted like iron when I took my first step into the golden domain of Yggdrasil. The shining glow blinded me for a moment. I held up my arm to block the light from my eyes. My heart gave a hard thump, betraying my fear of what was to come next.

“Are you ready?” Addie asked, waiting for me.

I swallowed. “No, but let’s get this over anyway.”

Holden

THE REALIZATION of what Ivy was afraid of left me stunned. That moment of shock cost me the window that I'd needed to hit Reginand with the arrow.

Cursing, I lifted the bow and notched the arrow. The drawstring pulled taut without problem, but my aim shook as I tried to remember how to fire one of these things. Ivy's dad had taught me—*years ago*.

Reginand caught sight of the bow, cocked his head to flash an amused grin, and dove past me like a skittering lizard headed straight for the spot Ivy had been moments ago. The bastard was fast, so I aimed for that same spot, too, with the hopes that I'd be able to get him there.

At the last second, Reginand leapt out of the way. He latched onto the wall, his long fingers digging into the sheetrock to hold him aloft. His head twisted unnaturally so he

could glare down at me. When his gaze flicked to the arrow now embedded in the floor where Ivy had been, Reginand tilted his head in recognition.

“Oh, you tried your best, little dragon man. However, your best was far from good.” He clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

Anger raged through me. Electricity sparked in the air, cracking all around us.

Reginand tensed. His eyes flickered with delight. He shoved off the wall and leapt towards the lingering magical energy near the arrow while laughing maniacally at my rage. “Good evening, wyrmling.”

I’d failed Ivy. She’d needed me to hit Reginand with the arrow so that she could have enough time to do what needed to be done in the Norse domain.

However, the arrow wasn’t entirely useless. I lunged, plucked it from the floor, and spun towards Reginand. The arrow in my hand sliced through the air like a knife. Reginand’s eyes went wide for a fraction of a second.

Then, in a blink, he vanished.

The arrow hit nothing. I stumbled, my momentum flinging me forward. Embarrassment warmed my cheeks, but I spun and scanned the apartment for Reginand. The spider-like Unseelie man perched on the back of the couch. I made a mental note to myself to burn the couch now that he’d touched it.

“You’re not getting through to her. I will stand here and keep fighting as long as I have to.” I spread my feet apart, ready to keep Reginand at bay.

The Unseelie man narrowed his eyes at me. His scowl twisted to the side like he was considering his next move.

I didn’t give him time to think. I lunged again and brought the arrow down. Of course, Reginand stepped in-between again. His scent still lingered, though. I could catch him right before he appeared, allowing me to redirect my attack. Though

I missed again, my senses allowed me to keep Reginand on his toes.

My beast roared with delight. Reginand wouldn't have time to use the magic that'd been left behind. He wouldn't be able to follow Ivy so long as I kept this up.

Reginand sighed, a sound that more a growl of frustration. "You annoy me."

Magic slammed into the air. I was ready for it, though. Ivy's magical outbursts had prepared me for this. I leaned into the rush and braced myself so the hit barely budged me. When I turned a toothy grin towards Reginand, he finally paused in shock.

Ivy Rae

I LET OUT an unsteady breath and nodded.

Let's get this over with.

Reginand still hadn't broken through into the domain. I figured that meant Holden had hit the Unseelie man with the cursed arrowhead. Reginand would be sleeping, trapped in a dream state created by my natural magic.

Meanwhile...I was about to get a magical lobotomy.

Okay, so it wasn't that visceral, but my crackling nerves really thought otherwise as Addie lifted a hand to my chest. I felt the brush of her fingertips against my skin before a warm sensation spread. The warmth emanated from my skin and sank deeper, enveloping my thundering heart.

My lungs refused to expand. Breath caught in my chest, panic tried to take ahold of me. I did my best to keep it at bay, but it remained unrelenting as Addie's hand closed around that seed of magic that'd been inside me this whole time.

She met my eyes.

I knew that this was the catalyst that'd allowed me to be reborn as Ivy Rae. In taking it out, there was a chance that I would cease to exist. We had no way of knowing if my life depended on this leaf and its power. However, I knew that it rightfully belonged to the tree.

"Tell everyone I love them," I said, my voice high pitched with fear.

Addie didn't try lying to me. She didn't tell me that everything would be okay. She didn't even give me a reassuring smile because that would have been a kind of lie, too. Instead, her expression remained steady and determined. When she nodded, I knew that she would do as I requested, even if it meant taking the brunt of everyone's anger and anguish.

Mom and Holden would be the worst. Dad would retreat. He would go into the lodge and spend more time with the Sluagh spirits while he tended to his broken heart—the man had lost his entire court, and I knew that losing his only daughter would hurt even more. Mom and Holden would level the world in an attempt to bring me back.

Maybe they had the power to do so.

Maybe together they would be able to give me a third chance at life.

"Would you look at that!" Addie's voice rose with delight.

I cracked open an eye and nervously peeked out of curiosity. In Addie's hand was a gleaming leaf with a swirl of cosmos floating in the depthless center.

My stomach dropped and my head spun.

"You're still standing and everything!" Addie clapped me on the shoulder.

She turned and lifted her open palm to the world tree.

Before she could place the leaf where it belonged, Holden's voice broke through the domain.

"Watch out!"

Time slowed.

Holden reached out to catch Reginand by the back of his shirt. Reginand, eyes wide and reflecting the golden glory of Yggdrasil, stared up at the branches with unhinged awe written all across his face.

The power that the leaf had given me was gone, but that meant I could reach deep into my own power without fear anymore. And now Reginand was trapped between me and Holden. The man realized it, too.

Hands spread out wide, palms up, on either side of myself, I reached deep and dredged up the dream magic that ran in my family. Maybe I hadn't been brought into this world the normal way, but I still shared blood with my mother. Dreams were a power that the Seelie and Unseelie nobility shared.

While I wove a dream to capture Reginand in, Holden used Reginand's hesitation to tackle him to the ground. I had to be careful. If I caught Holden in this magical net, he would fall into the dream right along with Reginand. I had no desire to cross into any other realm today.

All I wanted was to go home and celebrate a successful day and a long future with my fated mate.

Though I'd envisioned the dream like a net, I reformed it into vines that dug their way up out of the earth beneath Reginand so that Holden wouldn't get caught in it. The vines wrapped around Reginand's wrists and ankles. He tried to thrash and throw himself in-between, but my dream already had him. It dragged his consciousness down into the deep, leaving his body limp and unmoving.

Holden's shoulders slumped with relief. He lifted his gaze to meet mine, and I watched his entire face light up. Leaving Reginand on the ground, Holden rushed to me and swept me into his arms.

"You're still alive," he said into the crook of my neck.

I reached up and fisted my hand in the back of his shirt. "I'm so sorry."

Addie stepped up alongside us and gestured to the sleeping Reginand. “You made that look easy.”

I’d been too afraid to truly tap into my magic all my life. There’d been a fear in the back of my mind that my own arcana would turn me back into the evil queen I’d been in a past life. With that fear laid to rest, I could truly harness my own magic for the first time.

And it felt freeing.

“How does it feel?” Addie asked. “I know you gave up a lot today.”

I shook my head. Holden pulled back and gave us both a questioning look.

Smiling up at the gleaming tree, I said, “If anything, this feels right.”

Mom scowled, her arms crossed over her chest. I simply met her glare and remained immovable. I wanted an apology, and I would stand here all day until I got one.

The thing was, Mom had given in and accepted my mate bond with Ivy already. Mom stubbornly refused to apologize for doing what she believed to be protecting me. Even if she had the best intentions, that couldn't change the harm that she'd done.

"Fine!" she howled, throwing her hands in the air.

Her friends had warned me that this could take days, weeks even. I knew better than that. Mom truly loved us, even Ivy. She'd just been afraid of the past.

"I can trust that fate wouldn't steer you wrong. She makes you happy, and I don't see that changing any time soon." Mom's expression softened. "Ivy Rae will always be Ivy Rae. I know that now."

"And I'm not going to visit Grandma," I added, driving home my stance.

After this, I would have to warn Sawyer that Mom would be on his case soon. Now that she couldn't hound me about Ivy or my duties or visiting Grandma for a break, Mom would turn her attention on Sawyer.

He was going to have to flee the state if he wanted any peace.

However, the man bounded into the room, hooked an arm around Mom's shoulder, and pulled her in.

"What's going on?" he asked happily even though Mom narrowed her eyes at him.

Maybe the two of them could torment each other for a little.

I would be fine with that. I needed to finish moving my mate's things into the trailer.

We'd decided that renting an apartment in the warehouse wasn't the safest place. Not only was it loaded with memories of the Unseelie man that'd broken in to torment her, but the upstairs neighbors had once again broken the big window.

Ivy wanted peace, and we could have that in my trailer on the edge of the supernatural territory. We'd agreed that Ivy could create her own fae domain out there, too. It would open a lot of space that the trailer didn't really have.

Fae magic made expanding our home easier and more convenient than ever.

"I'm happy for you," Mom said, to my surprise. She touched my cheek and smiled up at me. "I wasn't ready for you to grow up and not need me. You ran off and showed me that you're more than capable all on your own."

"Shucks, Mom. We're always going to need you," Sawyer said, shaking her. "Need you to stay away."

Her jaw dropped. Thunder cracked outside.

That was my exit. The moment had been broken, and a storm was about to hit. I gave Sawyer a two-fingered salute and ducked outside so I could meet up with my mate.

My beast pranced excitedly. It finally had what it wanted, someone to love and protect. The fear of the Treasure Sickness dissipated. I wouldn't have to worry about going mad like my grandfather because my beast was happy.

Ivy Rae

STARING at the ceiling in Holden's trailer, I pressed my palm to my sternum and tried to feel for that seed of magic that'd been with me all my life. Of course, it wasn't there. It'd been returned to the tree of life.

I couldn't figure out if I felt hollow or if I felt right. It was just...*different*. I knew that meant it would take time to adjust. In the moment, I'd been happy. I'd been able to reach into my own power and stop Reginand without hesitation.

The moment was over, and life had kept going, leaving me to figure everything out on my own.

Though, I wasn't on my own. I rolled over and wrapped myself around Holden. In his sleep, he put an arm around me, too. It was like a sleepover, but with a lot less clothing. I wore nothing but one of his old shirts, my legs bare so I could rub them up against his.

"Why are you awake?" he asked without opening his eyes.

"I thought you were asleep."

He cracked open one eye and looked over to me. "That doesn't answer my question."

I sighed. He was right, but I didn't really have an answer for him.

I wasn't sad or upset or even lost. There was just a strange sensation in my chest that needed time to get used to.

But when Holden rolled over and faced me, he ran his hands down my waist and along the leg that I had propped up over his hip. That odd sensation eased, and I drew in a steady breath. A smile reached my lips right before he pressed his own to them.

Nothing mattered so long as we were together.

Holden had apologized profusely for missing his shot with the arrow. He'd acted like it'd been the greatest letdown of the century, but I'd admitted giving him an arrow had been a mistake. I'd wanted to keep Holden away from the Unseelie

man, and a ranged weapon had seemed like the right idea at the time.

We should have taken Reginand on together. It'd taken us barely a minute to put an end to Reginand's heist the moment that Holden and I worked together. After that, we'd taken him to the Seelie castle where court guards chained him up and dragged him off to a dungeon cell.

Dad hadn't been happy that I'd chosen to take care of that on my own, but we hadn't stuck around to hear him out. Holden and I had thrown ourselves out to the beach and lain in the sand until sunrise.

It was over.

Reginand was being taken care of. The leaf had been returned to Yggdrasil—and I hadn't died. And now I had Holden, my fated mate.

“Do you think that's why Beryl was so cruel?” I asked, out of nowhere. Running a knuckle down Holden's cheek, I continued. “Because she didn't have you?”

He grinned sheepishly. “No, she was miserable because she wasn't *you*.”

My heart swelled with relief and gratitude. Beryl could never have a love like this, further proving that I would never become her.

“I love you,” I whispered into Holden's skin, thankful that we'd become more than friends after all.

Holden scooped me up with one arm and carried me into the kitchen. “I love you, too.”

It was as if nothing had changed between us. Not only did we pick up as if we hadn't been fighting a cured fae puppet for the past week, but I realized that our relationship hadn't changed that much. Of course, we were more physical than before, but our love remained the same.

We had loved each other like mates from the beginning. Our entire friendship had been built upon that bond.

In the kitchen, in nothing more than Holden's oversized shirt and a pair of booty shorts that disappeared beneath the hem, I peered past the curtain to see a familiar car in the driveway. Holden pressed against my behind and followed my gaze. His immediate groan killed the fun energy in the air.

I quickly ran my fingers through my hair. I thought we'd gotten past this part already, but it seemed that Holden's mom wasn't ready to leave us alone.

There was a quick rap on the door that made my heart leap into my throat. Yet, when Holden opened the door, there was only a covered casserole dish and a folded note. His mom was already backing out of the driveway as Holden lifted the dish.

The smell of maple and cinnamon wafted over to me. "Did she make us breakfast?"

Holden stared at it incredulously. "And it's still warm."

"I'll get the coffee started. Grab two forks. We're eating breakfast in bed."

Holden set the dish aside and sidled up to me, taking my hips in his hands so he could pull me tight to his body again. "You can make coffee like this, right?"

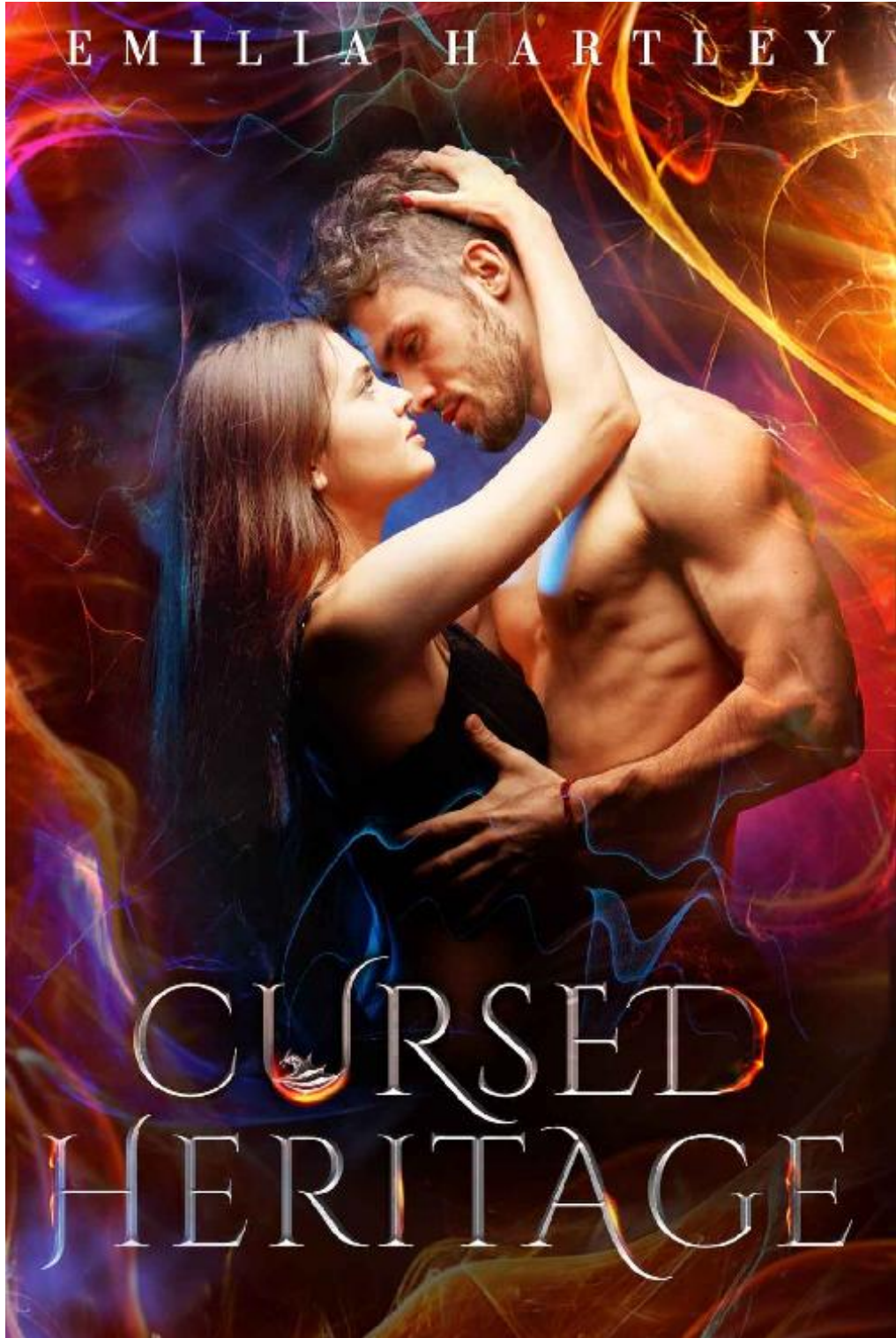
"You forget that I was raised in a café. I can make coffee in my sleep."

I was glad my own mother gave me, once an unseelie queen bent on destruction, a second chance. If she hadn't, I never would have known a love like this. I wouldn't have known a mate's touch, or the love of family and friends.

I would never have been the person I was meant to be.

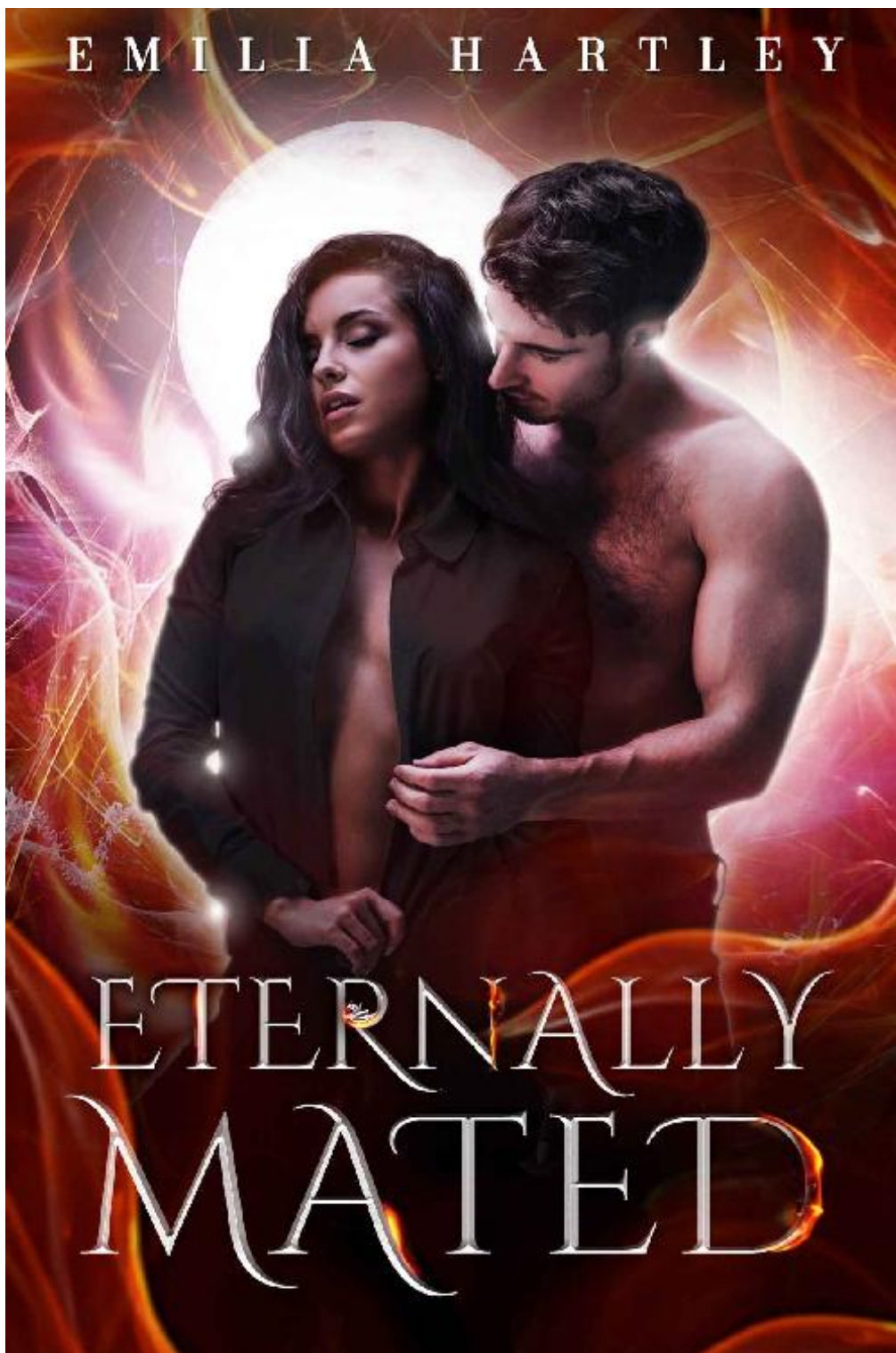
WHAT'S NEW

EMILIA HARTLEY



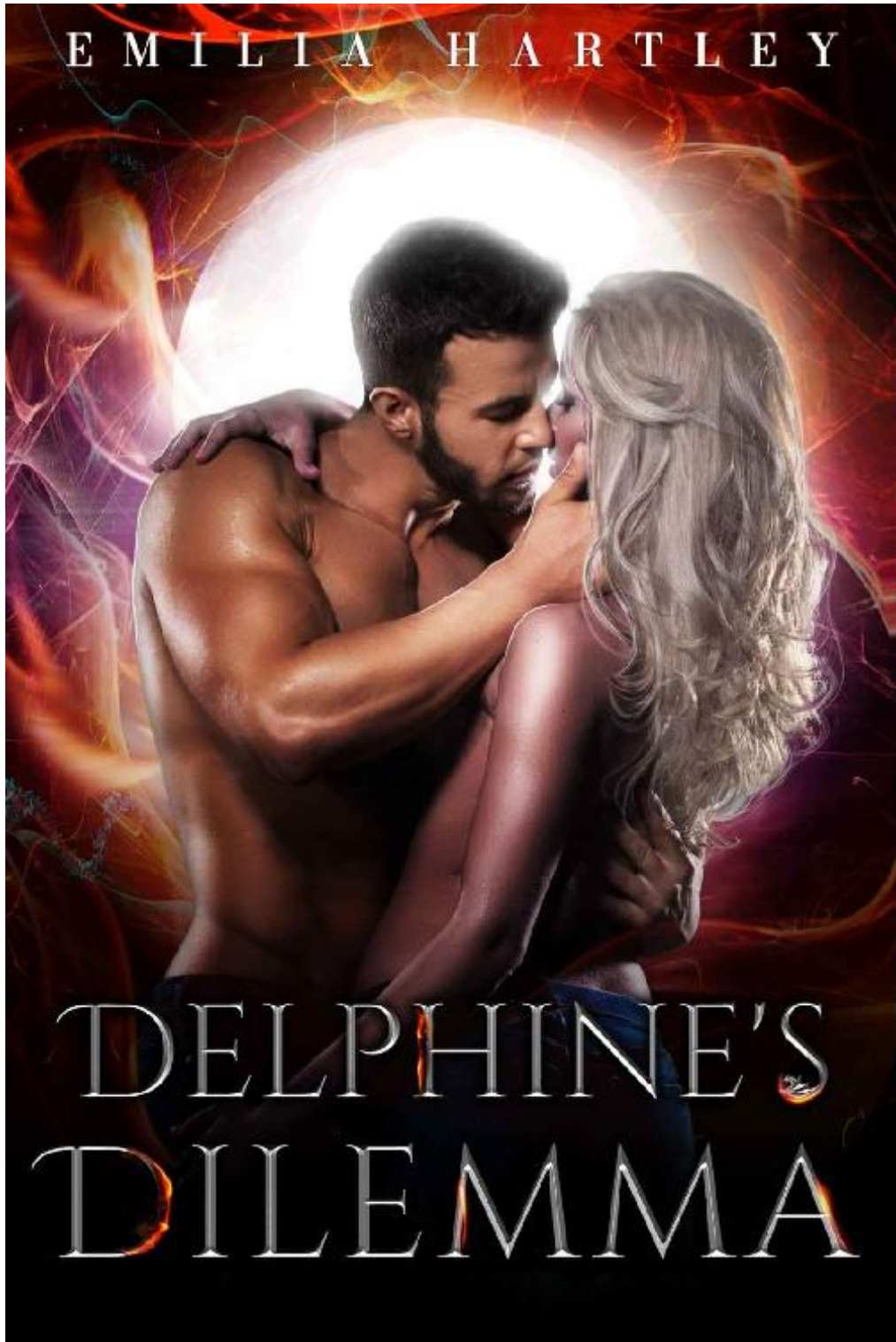
CURSED
HERITAGE

EMILIA HARTLEY



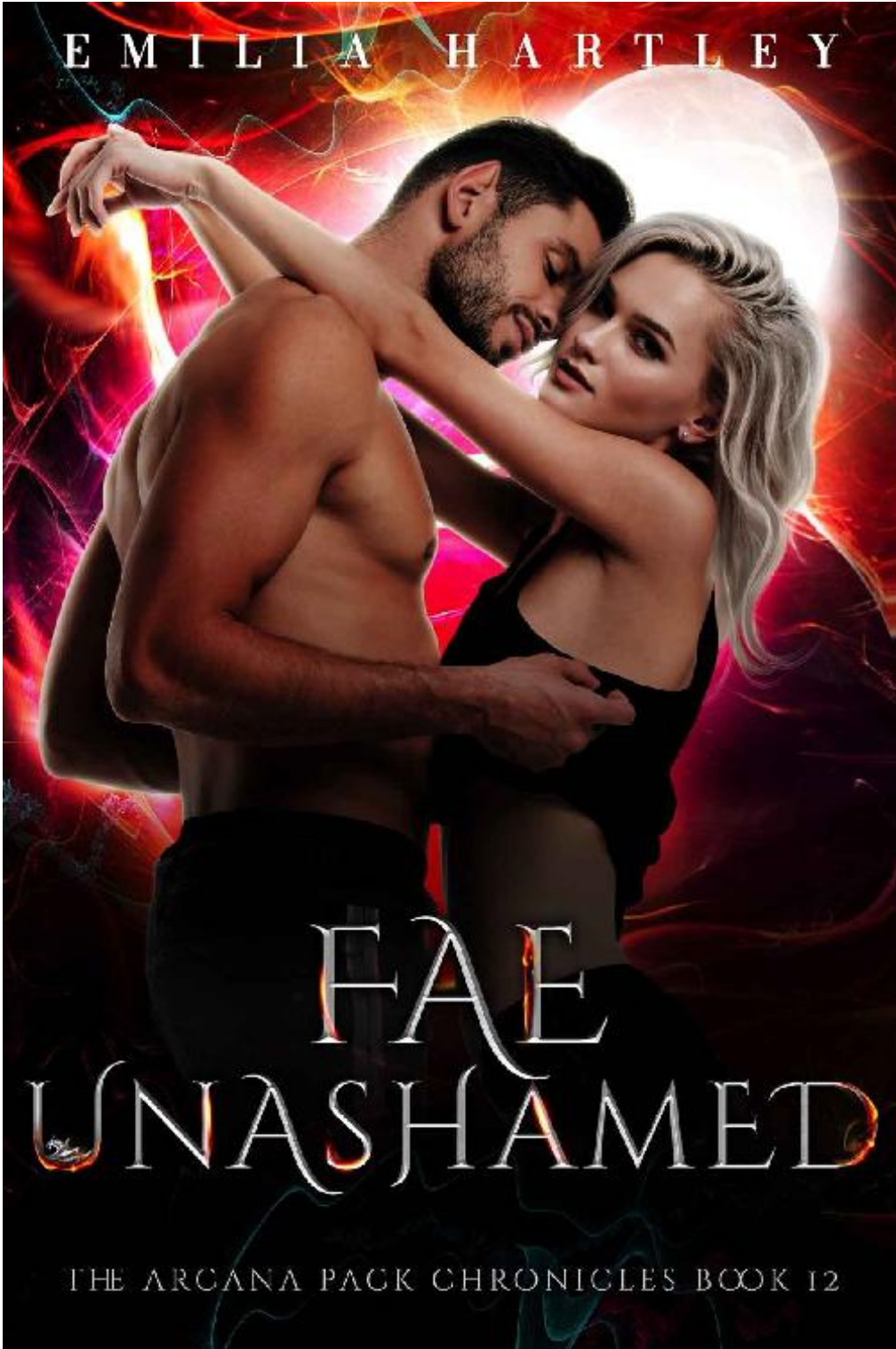
ETERNALLY
MATED

EMILIA HARTLEY



DELPHINE'S
DILEMMA

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FAE UNSHAMED

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 12

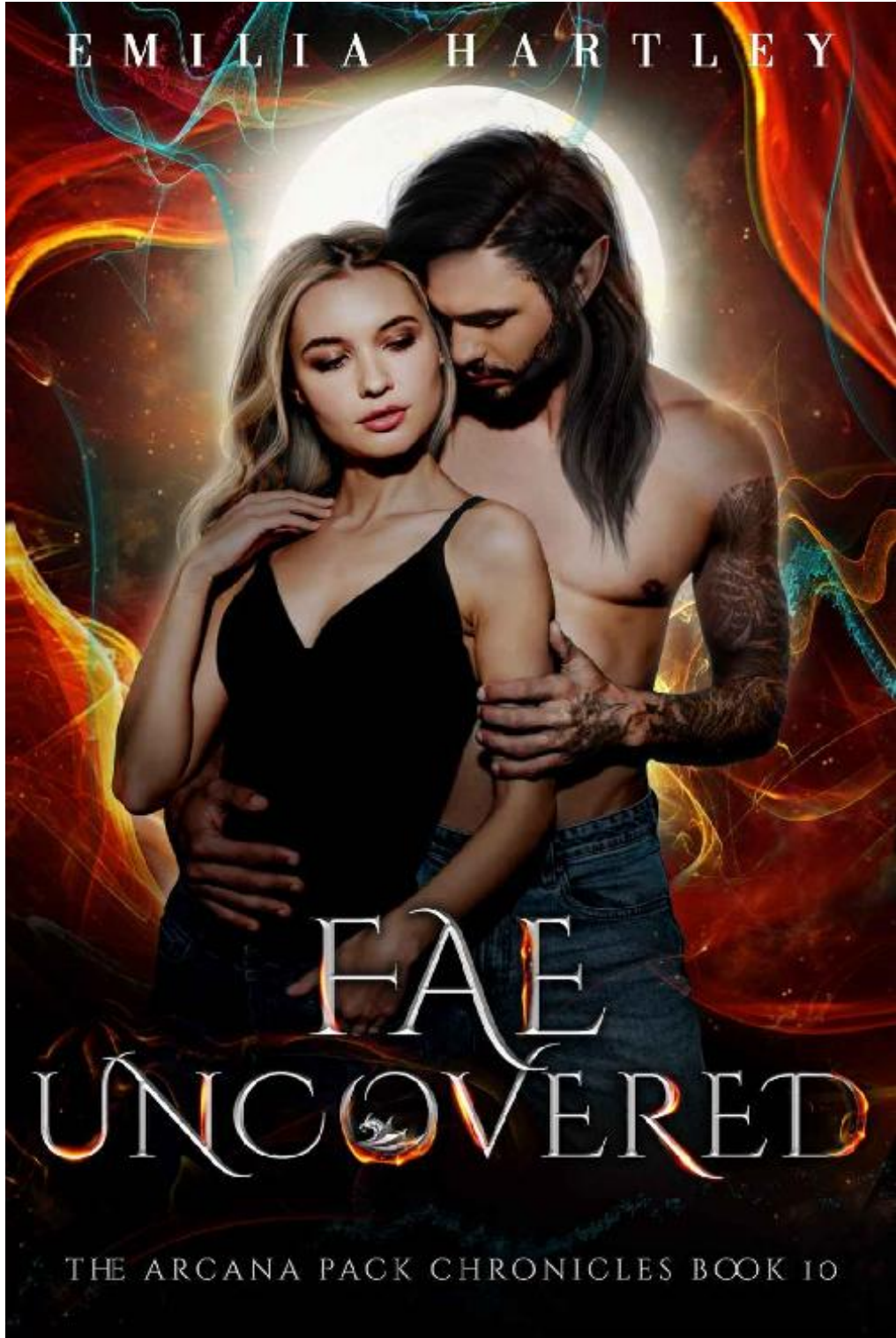
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The book cover features a man and a woman in a dark, fiery, and ethereal background. The man is shirtless and has his arms around the woman. The woman is wearing a black lace dress. The background is filled with swirling red and orange flames and a bright, glowing orb behind the man's head. The title 'FAE UNLEASHED' is written in a large, stylized, white font with a glowing effect.

FAE
UNLEASHED

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK II

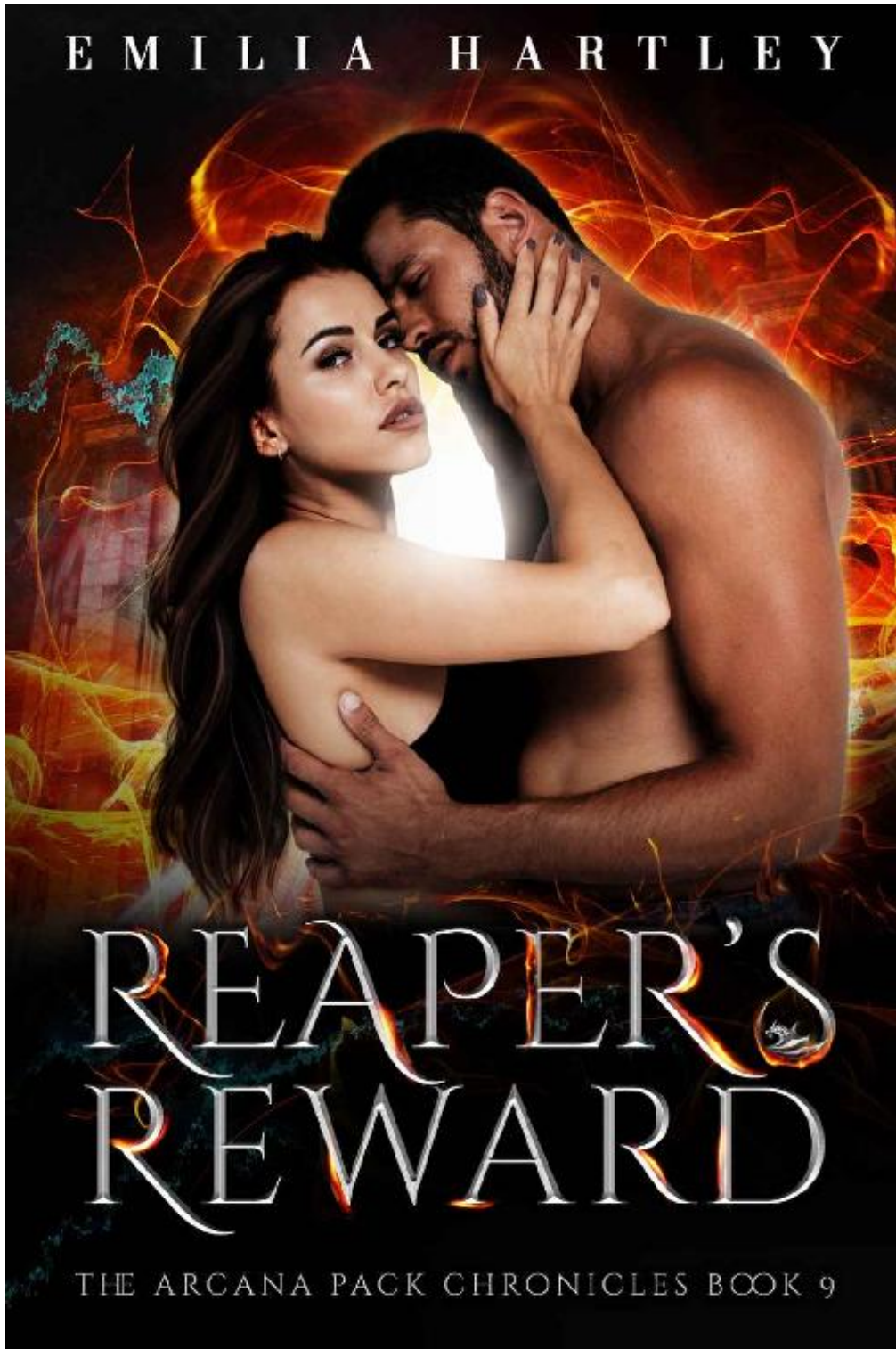
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FAE UNCOVERED

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 10

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REAPER'S REWARD

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 9

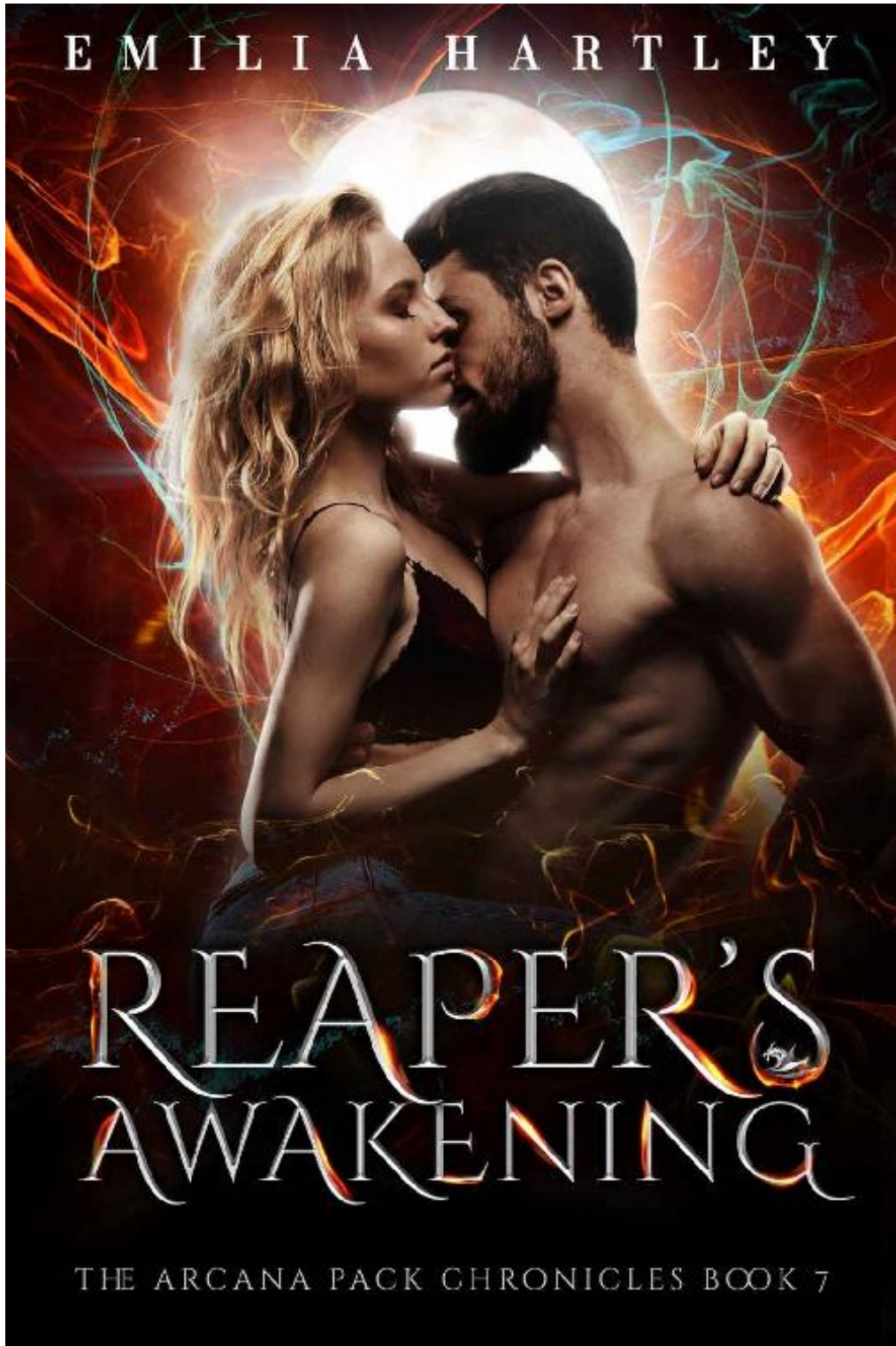
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REAPER'S
RISE

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 8

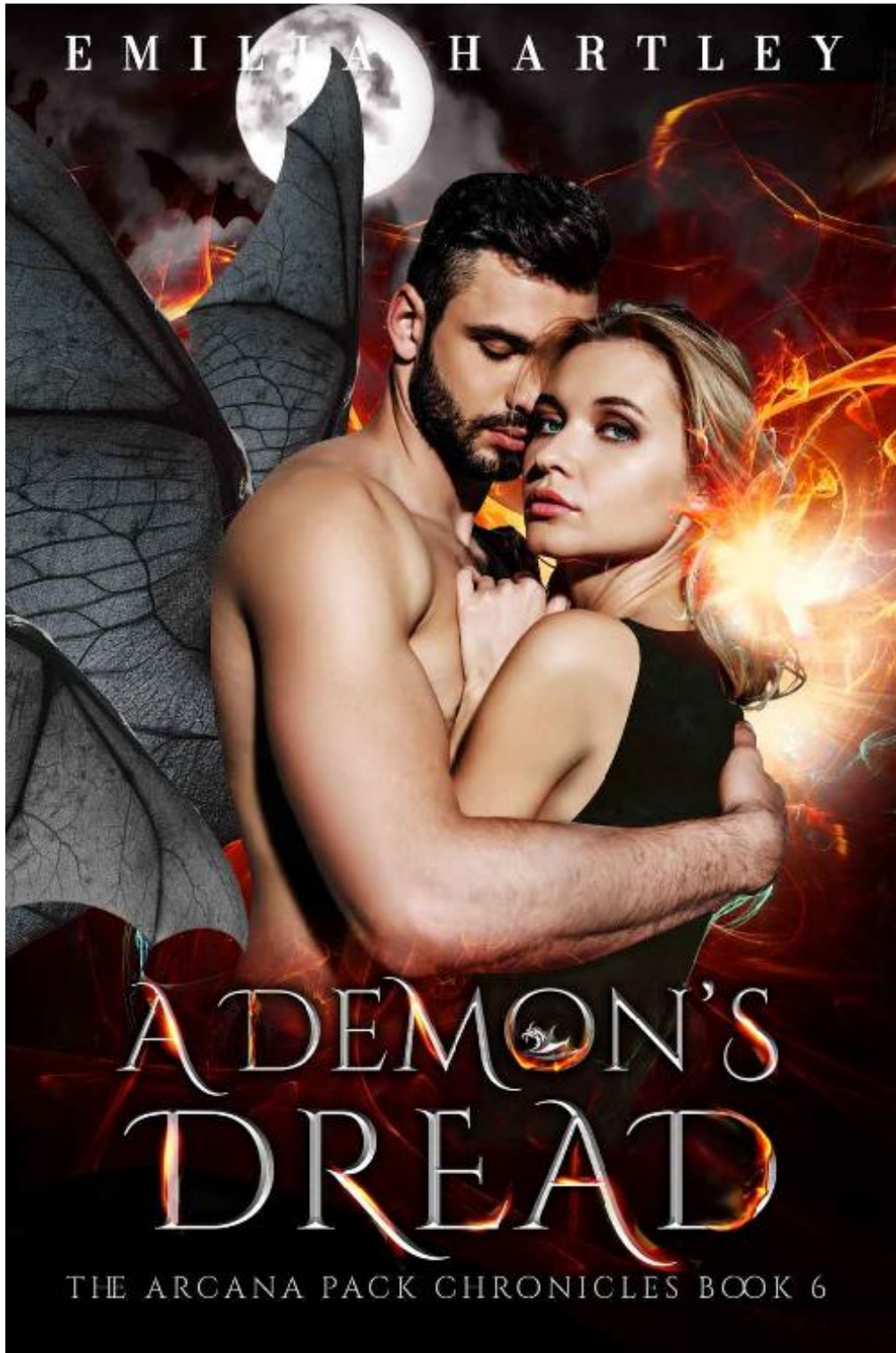
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REAPER'S AWAKENING

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 7

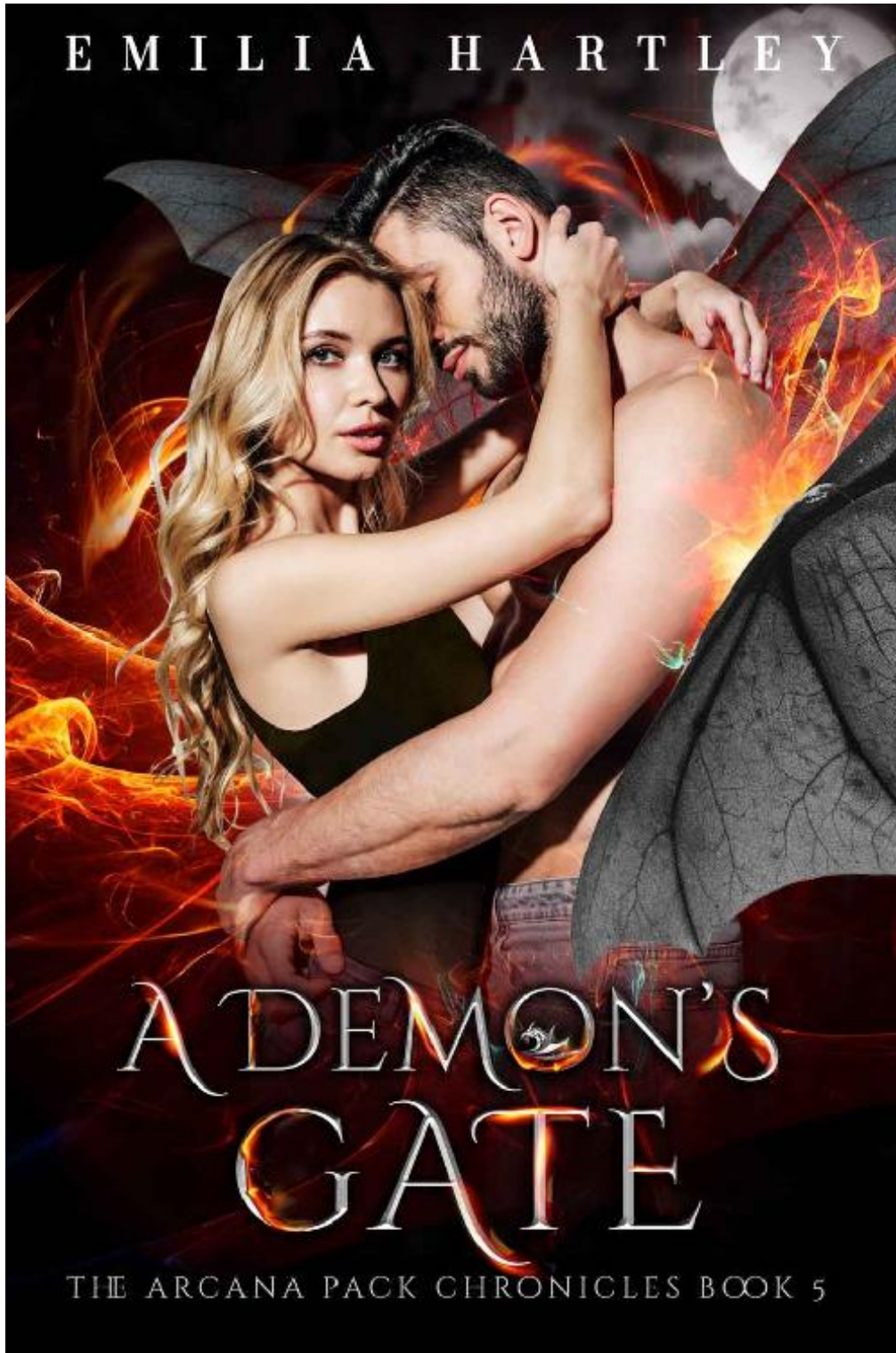
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A DEMON'S DREAD

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 6

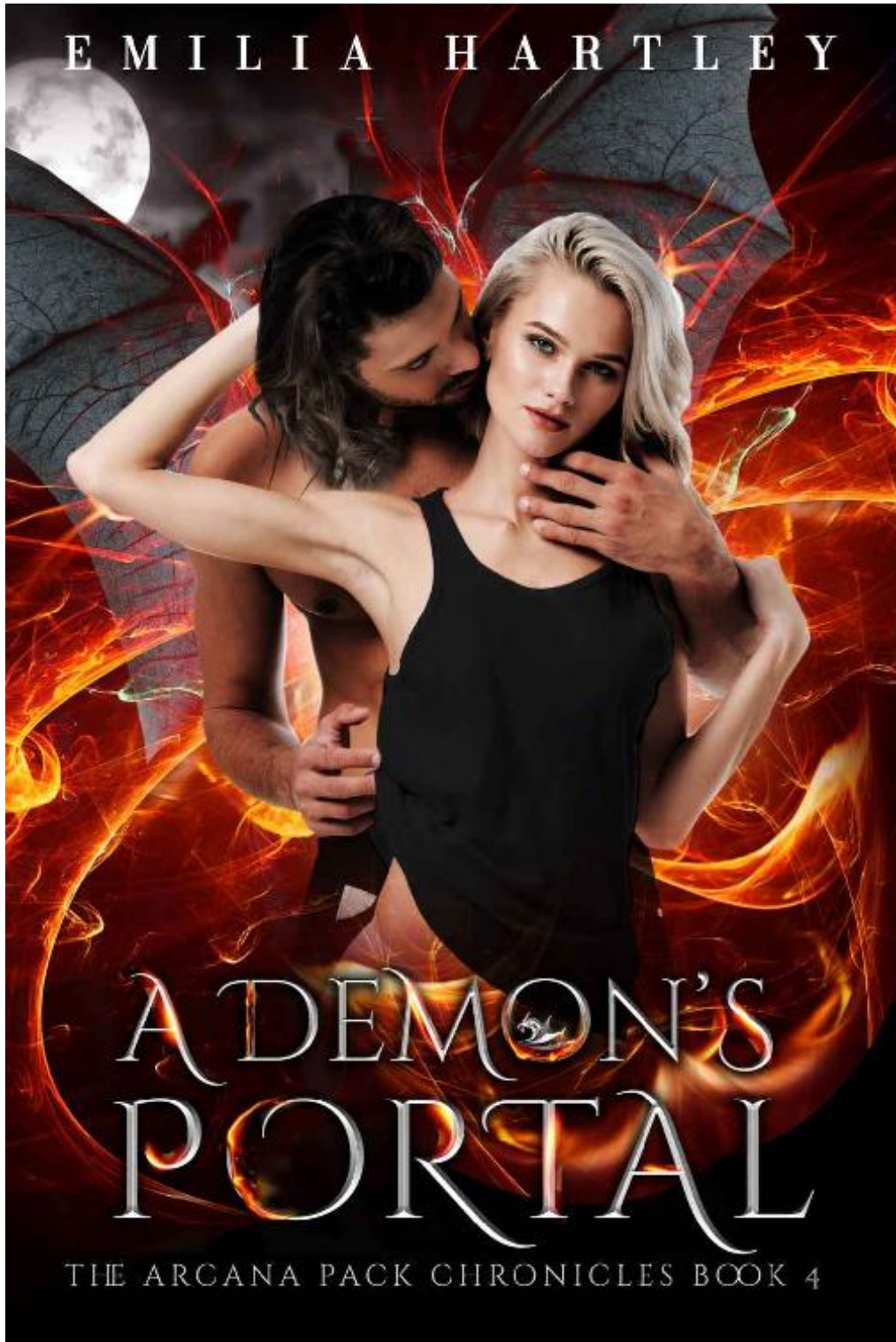
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A DEMON'S GATE

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 5

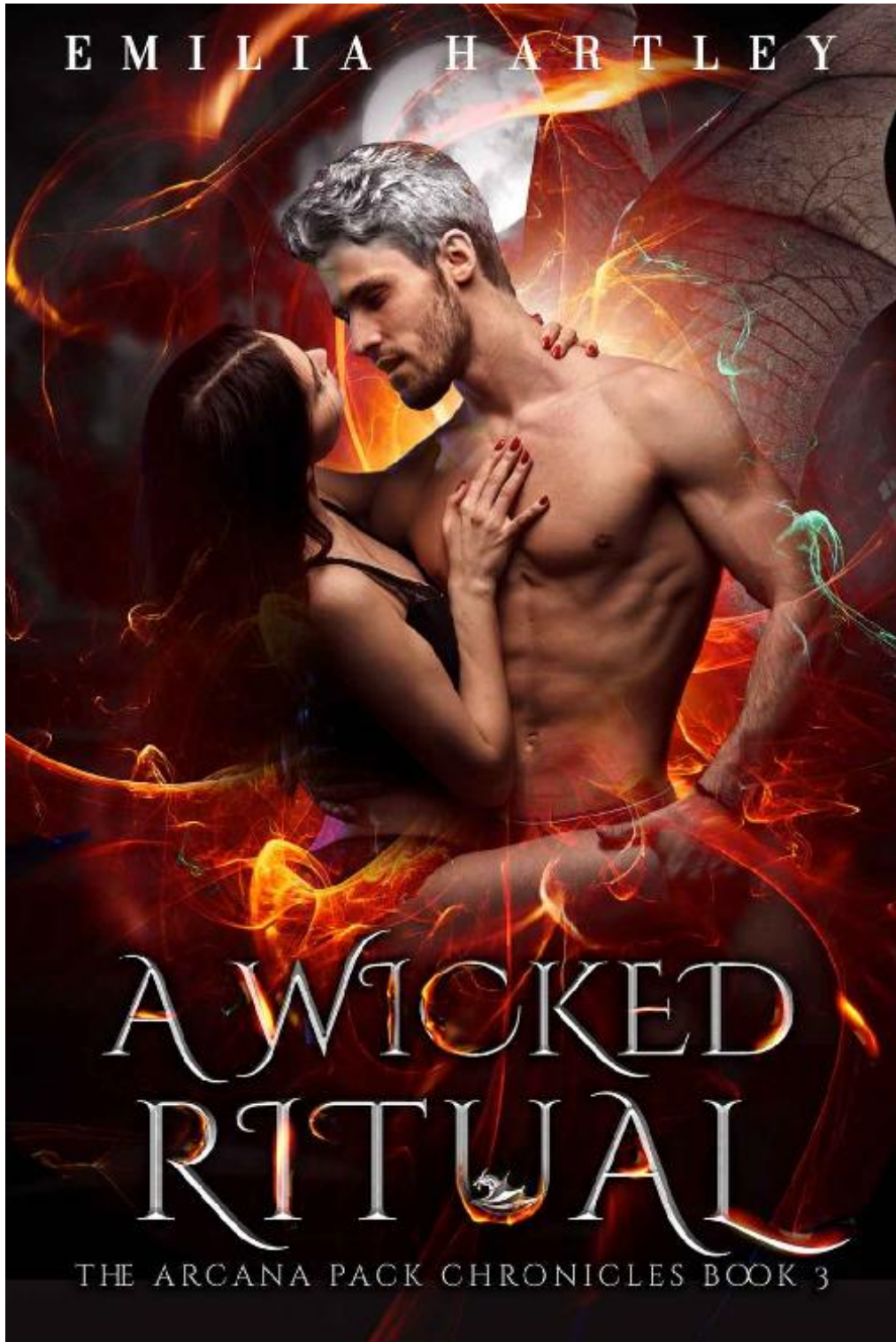
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A DEMON'S PORTAL

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 4

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A WICKED RITUAL

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 3

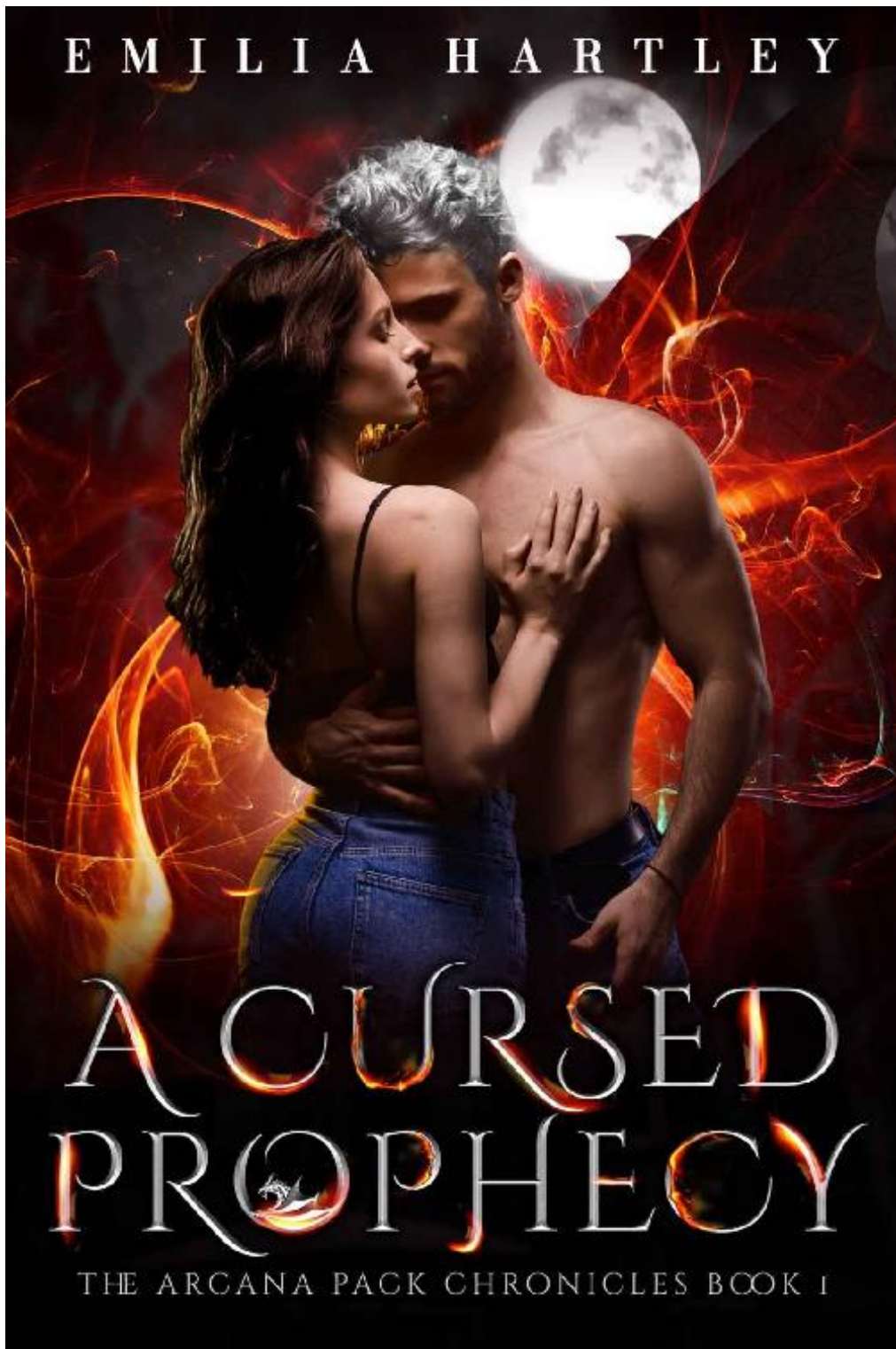
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A DANGEROUS PACT

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 2

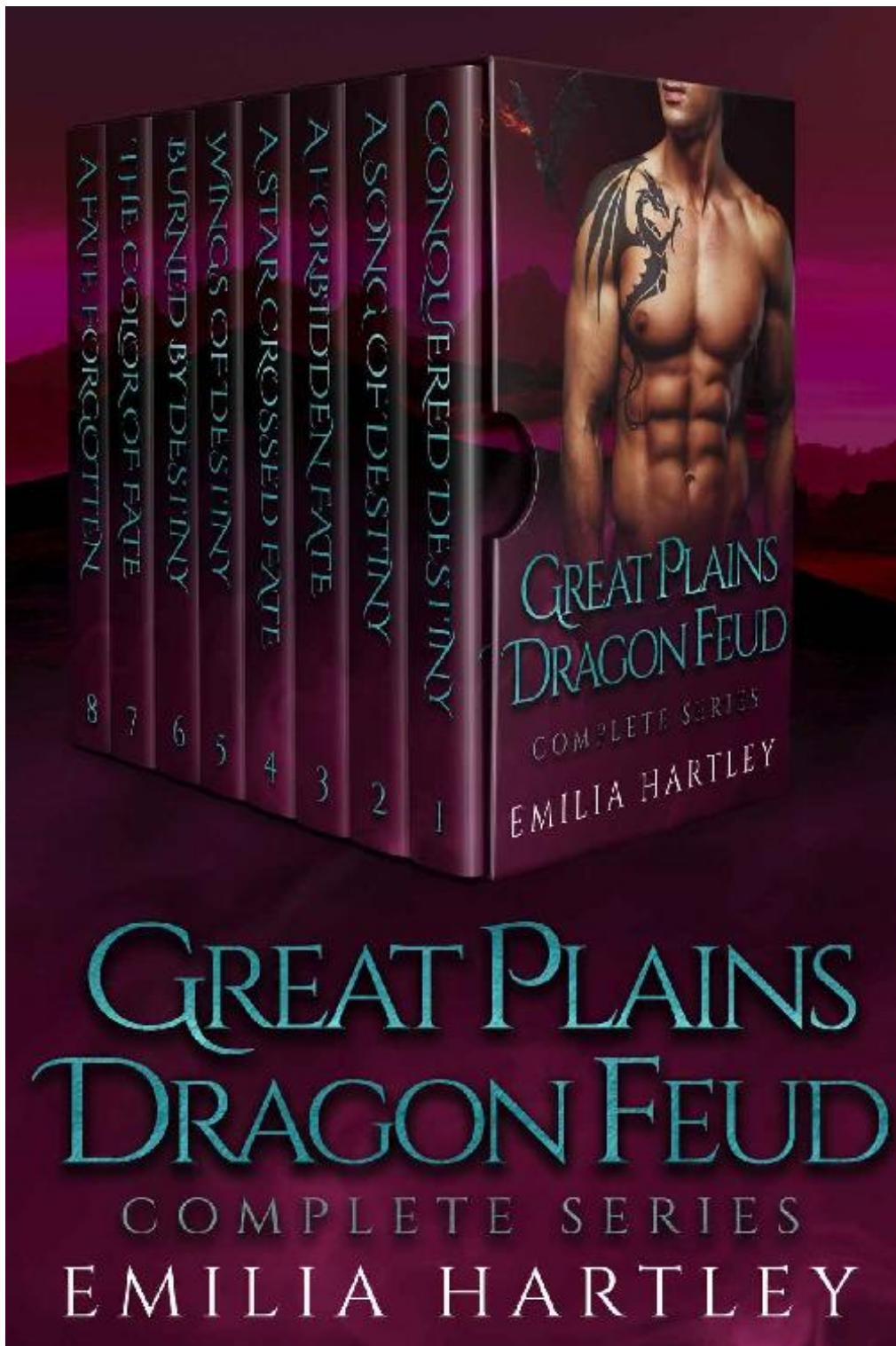
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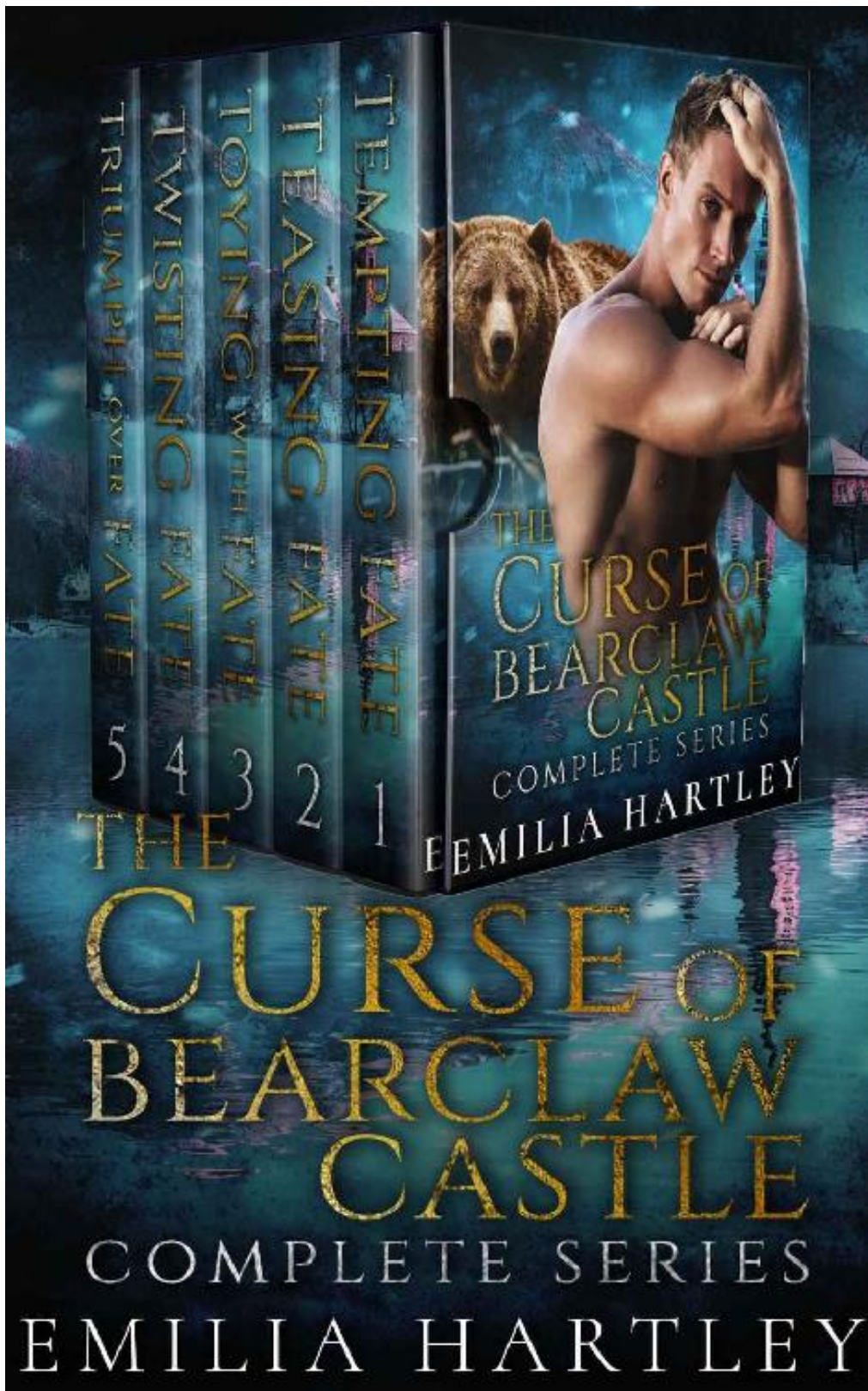
A CURSED PROPHECY

THE ARCANA PACK CHRONICLES BOOK 1

HEARTLIES BOX SETS



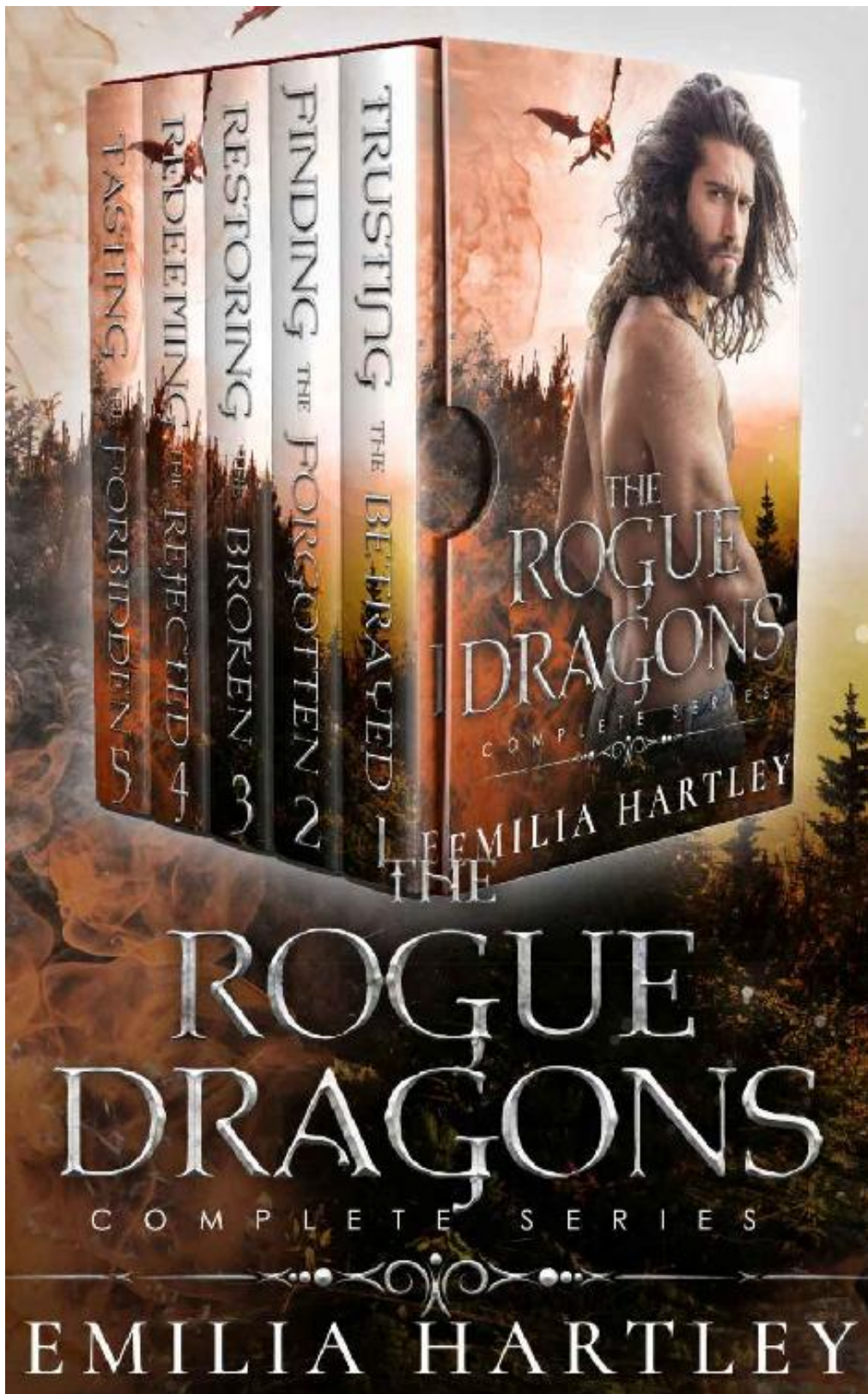
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DRAGON FEUD
COMPLETE SERIES
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TEMPTING FATE 1
TEASING FATE 2
TOYING WITH FATE 3
TWISTING FATE 4
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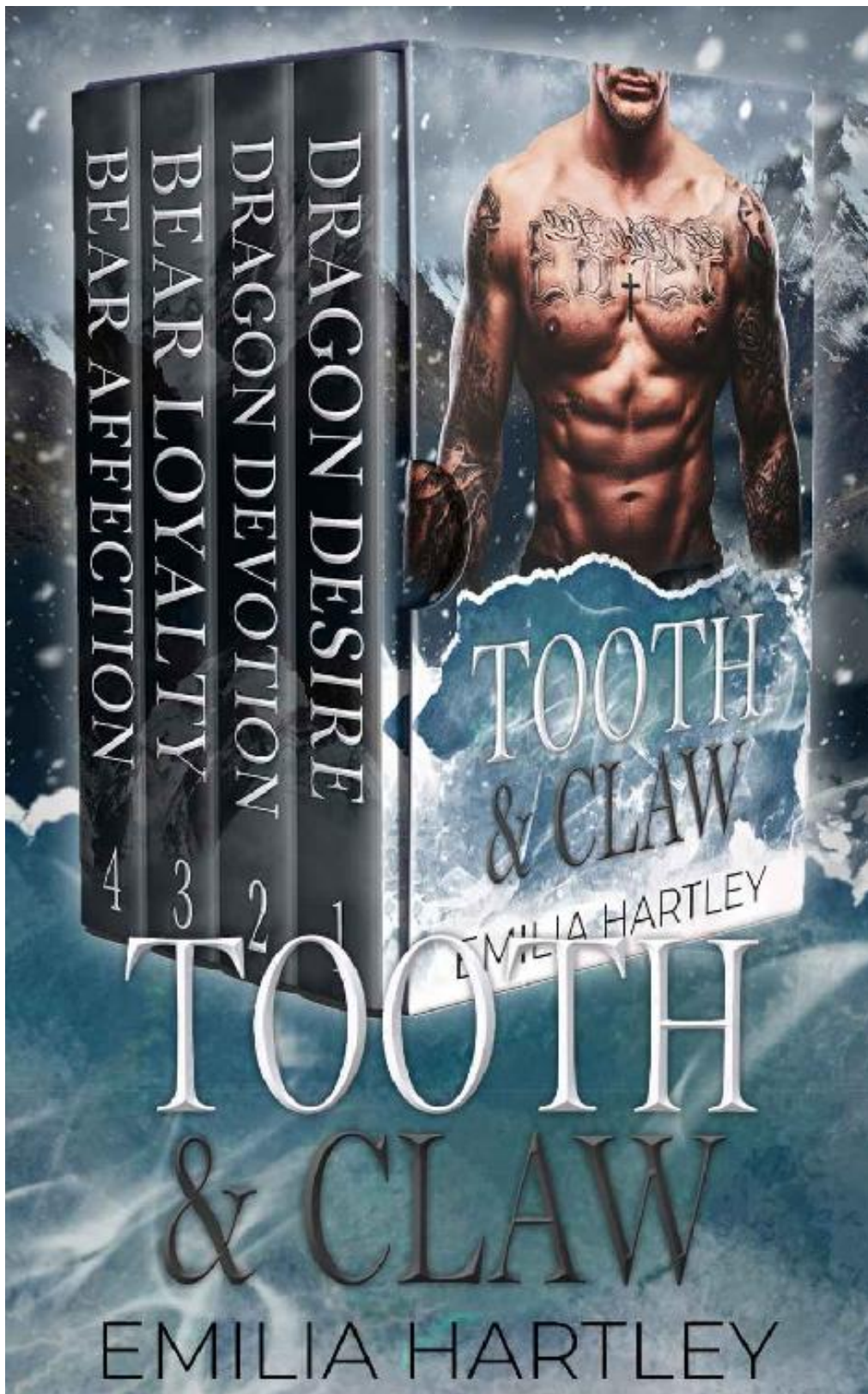


TRUSTING THE BETRAYED
FINDING THE FORGOTTEN
RESTORING THE BROKEN
REDEEMING THE REJECTED
TASTING THE FORBIDDEN

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THE
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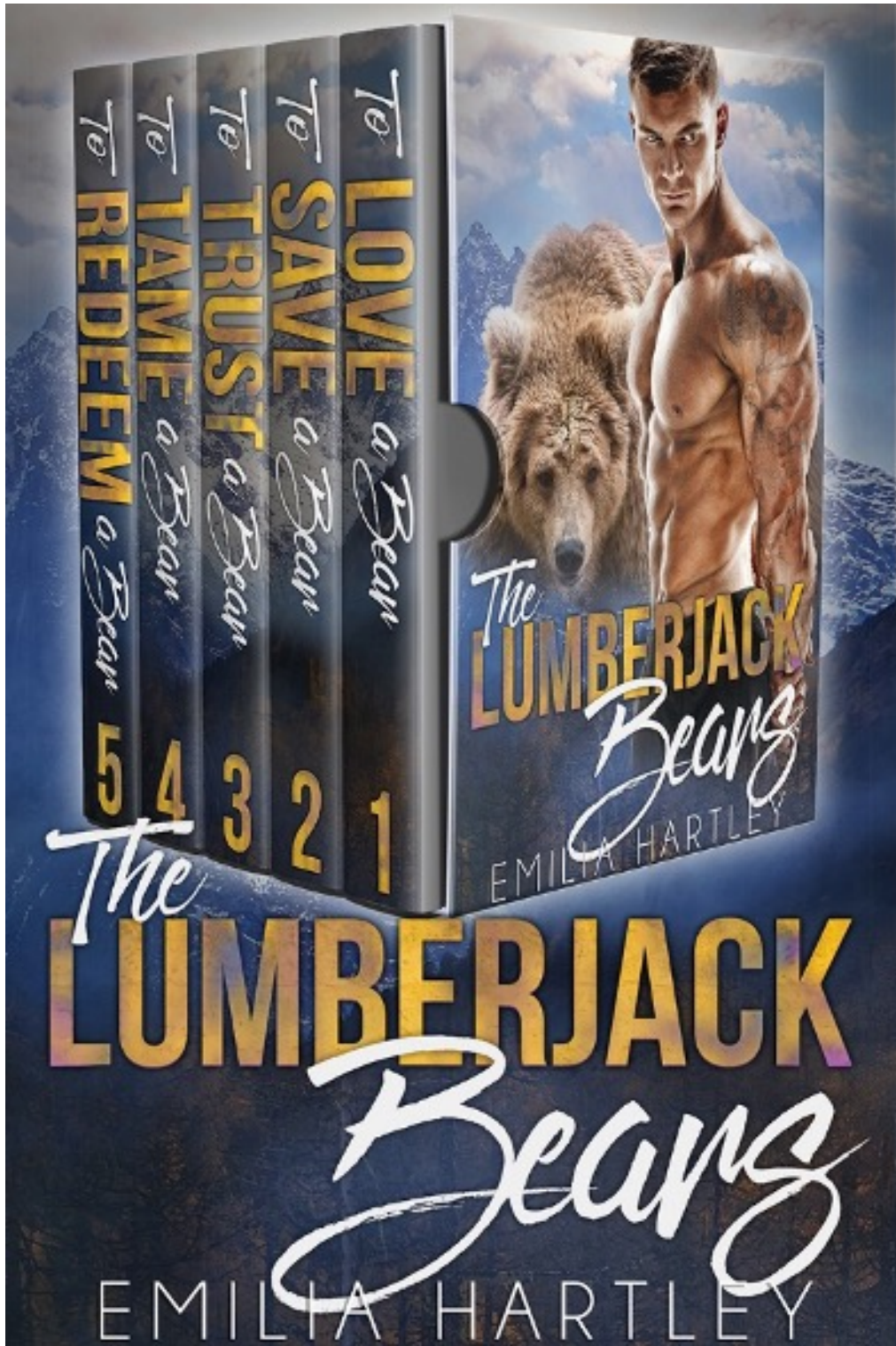
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DRAGON DESIRE
DRAGON DEVOTION
BEAR LOYALTY
BEAR AFFECTION

TOOTH
& CLAW

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To LOVE a Bear 1
To SAVE a Bear 2
To TRUST a Bear 3
To TAME a Bear 4
To REDEEM a Bear 5

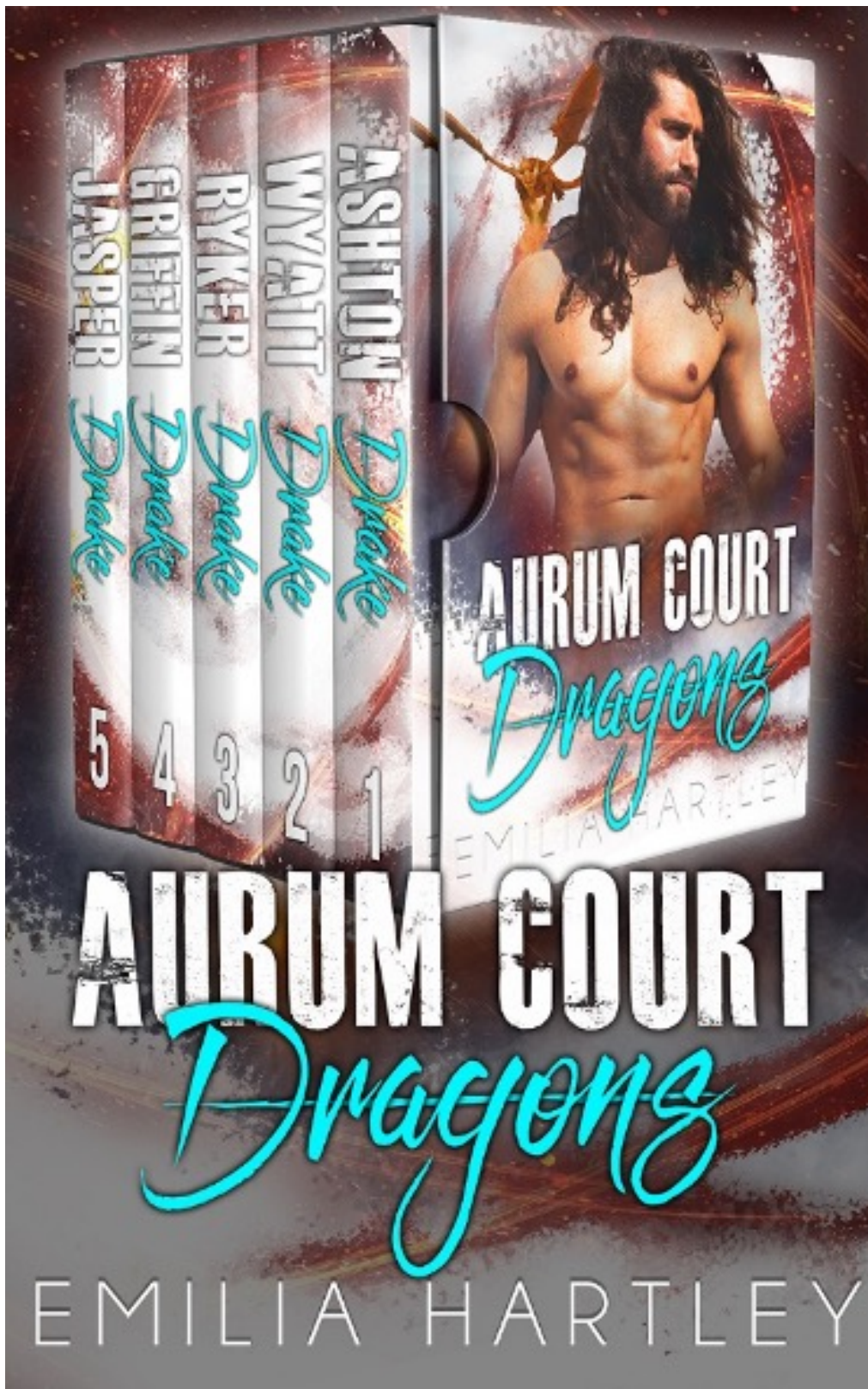
The LUMBERJACK Bears
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The LUMBERJACK Bears
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OUTCAST

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ASHTON
Snake
1

WYATT
Snake
2

RYKER
Snake
3

GRIFFIN
Snake
4

JASPER
Snake
5

AURUM COURT
Dragons
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AURUM COURT
Dragons

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THE BEAR'S MATCHMAKER
HER TRUE ALPHA MATE 2
HER ALPHA MISMATCH 3
HER ENCHANTED ALPHA MATCH 4

THE SHIFTER'S
MATCHMAKER
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THE SHIFTER'S
MATCHMAKER

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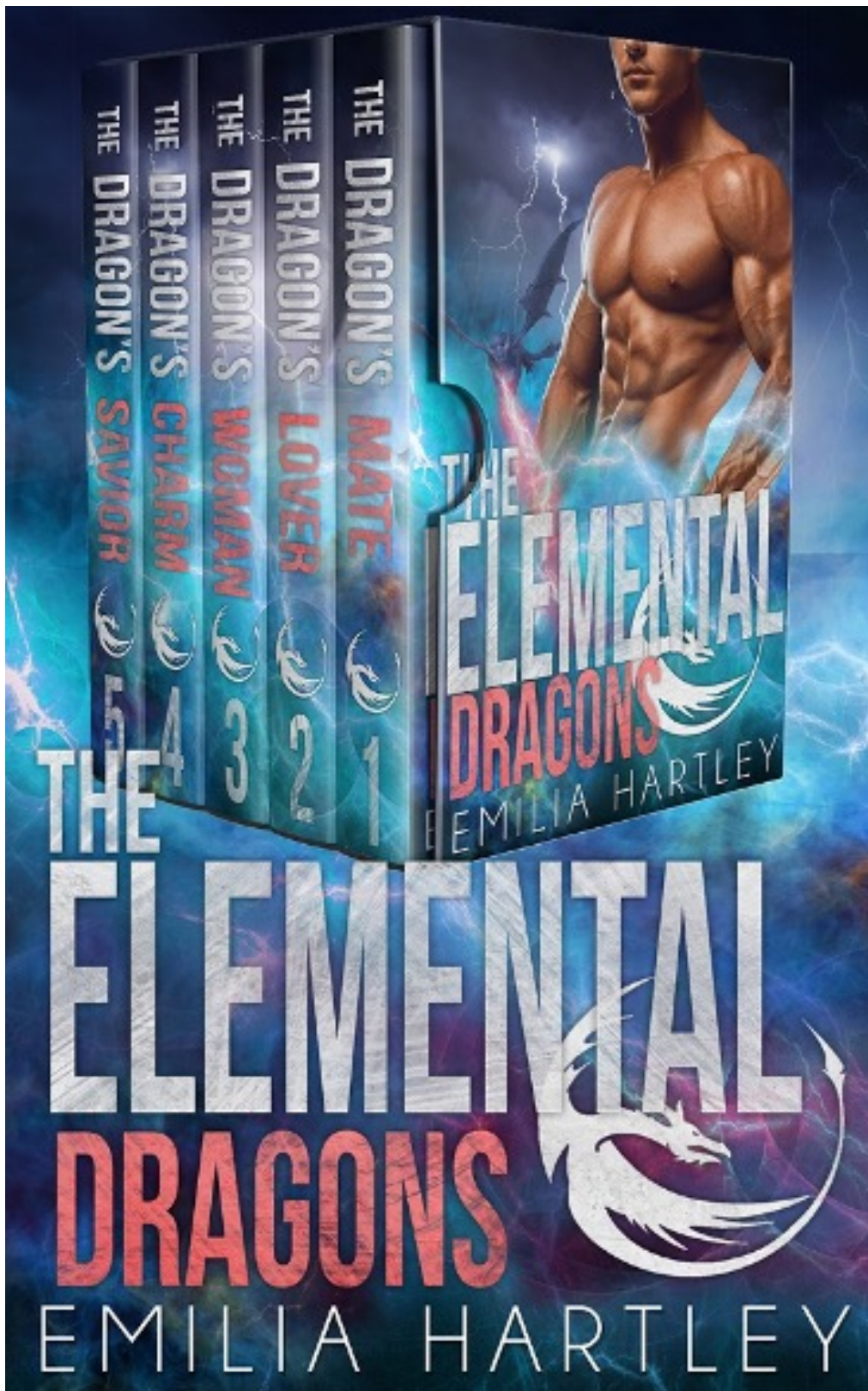
Mated to the DRAGON
Rescued by the DRAGON
Falling for the DRAGON
Claimed by the DRAGON

5 4 3 2 1

Fated
DRAGONS
EMILIA HARTLEY

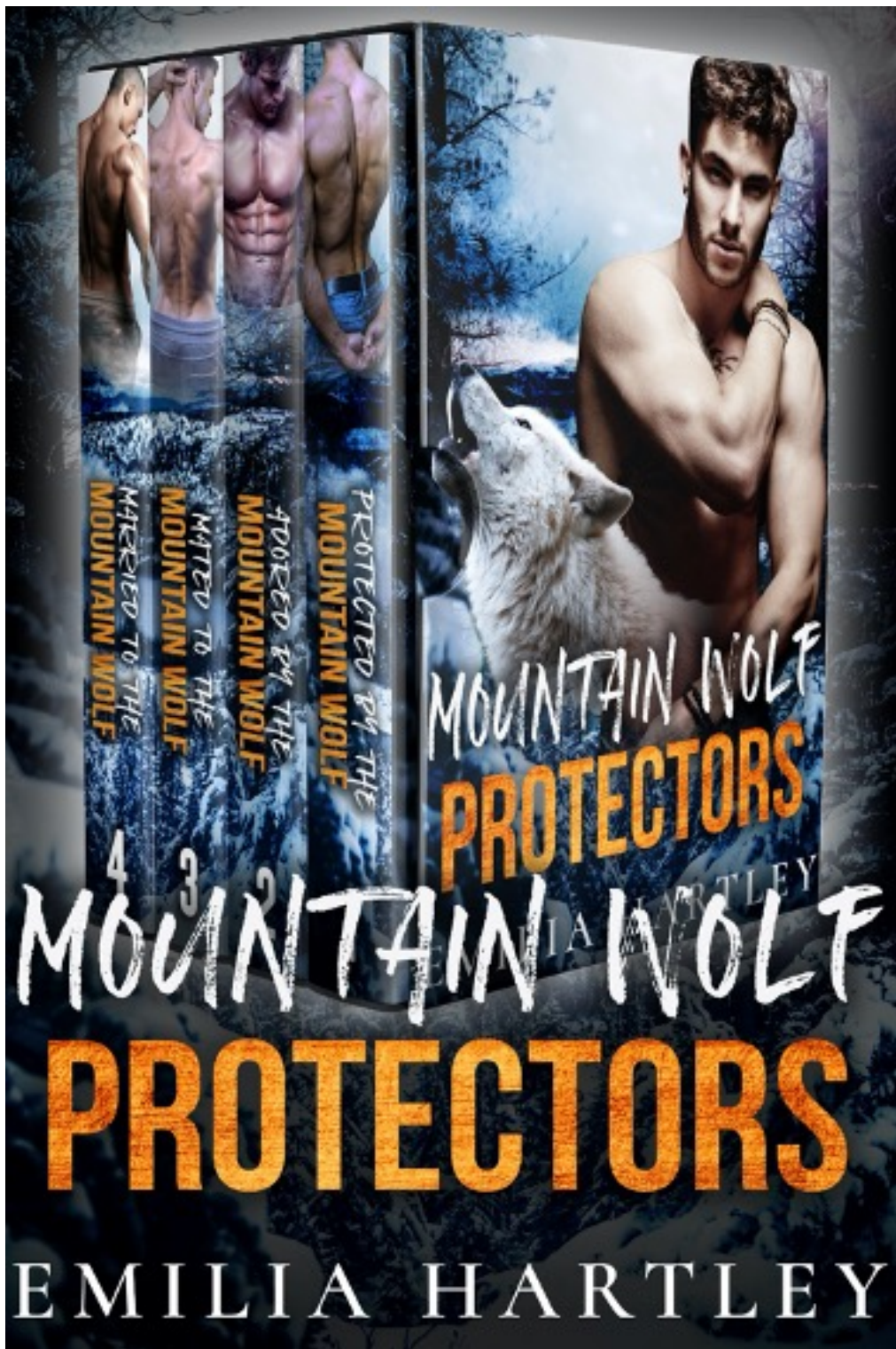
Fated
DRAGONS

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THE DRAGON'S MATE
THE DRAGON'S LOVER
THE DRAGON'S WOMAN
THE DRAGON'S CHARM
THE DRAGON'S SAVIOR

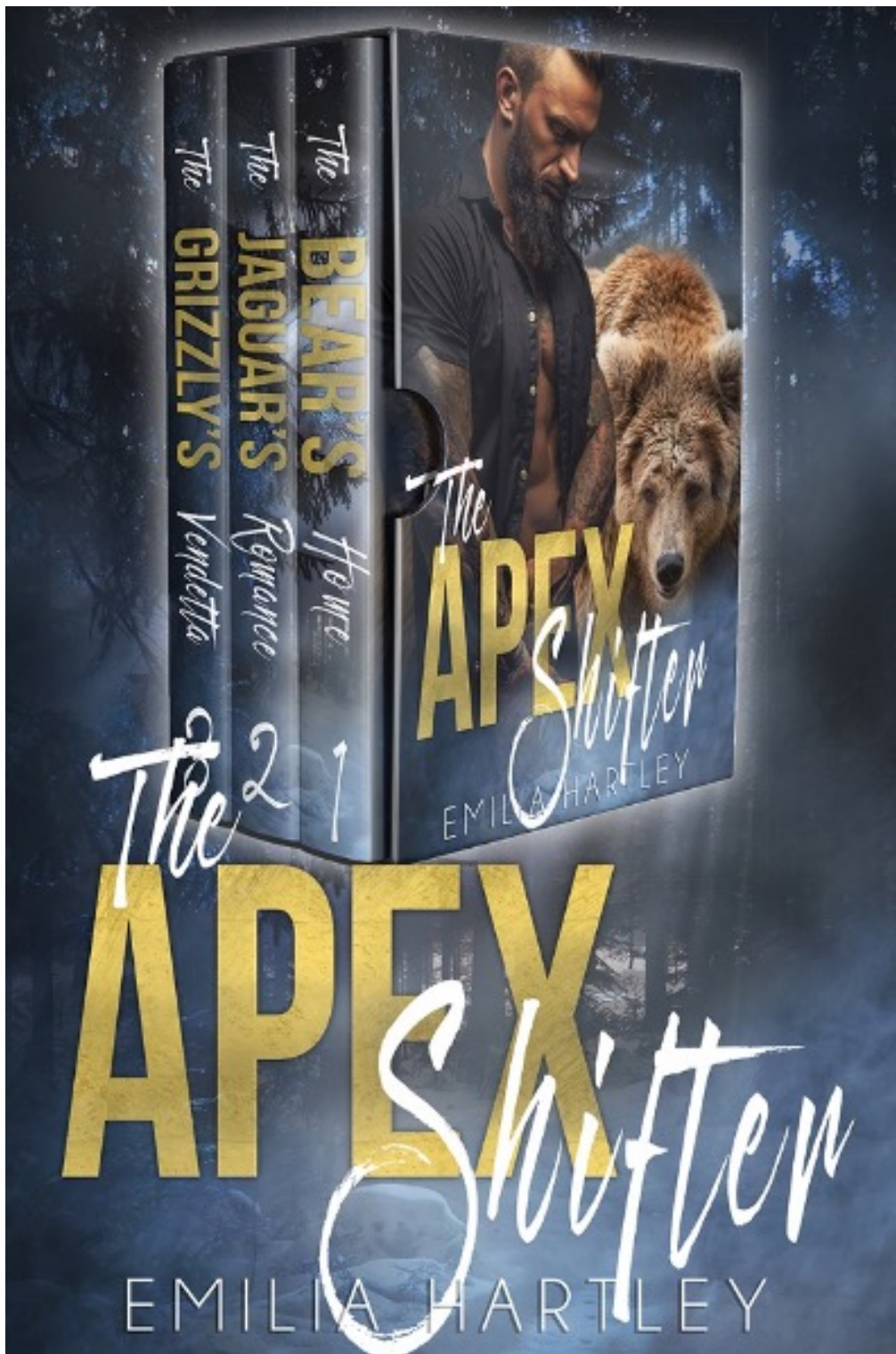
THE
ELEMENTAL
DRAGONS
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4
3
2
1
PROTECTED BY THE MOUNTAIN WOLF
MATED TO THE MOUNTAIN WOLF
MARRIED TO THE MOUNTAIN WOLF

MOUNTAIN WOLF
PROTECTORS
EMILIA HARTLEY

MOUNTAIN WOLF
PROTECTORS
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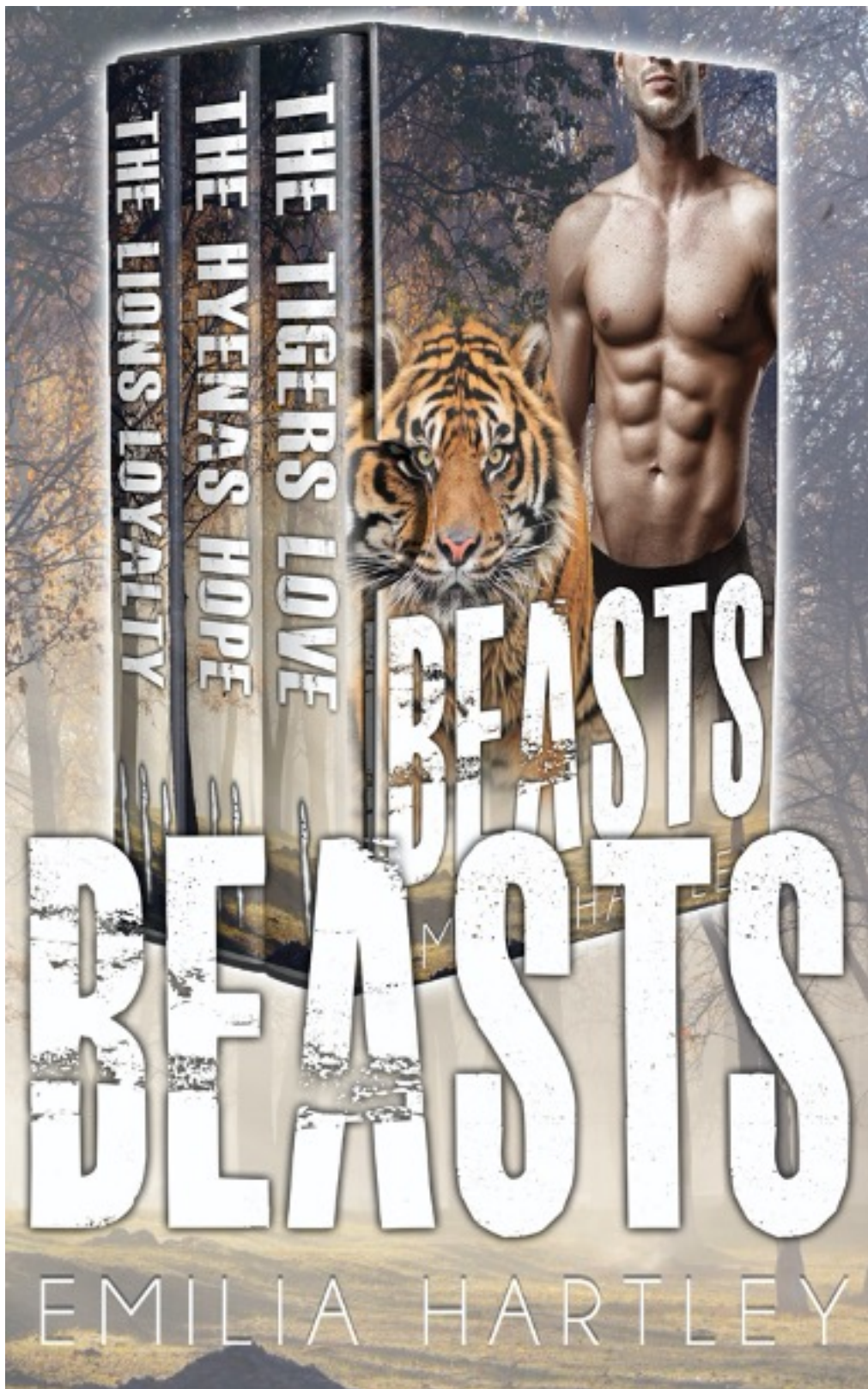


The BEAR'S HEART
The GRIZZLY'S VENGETTA

The APEX Shifter
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The 21

The APEX Shifter
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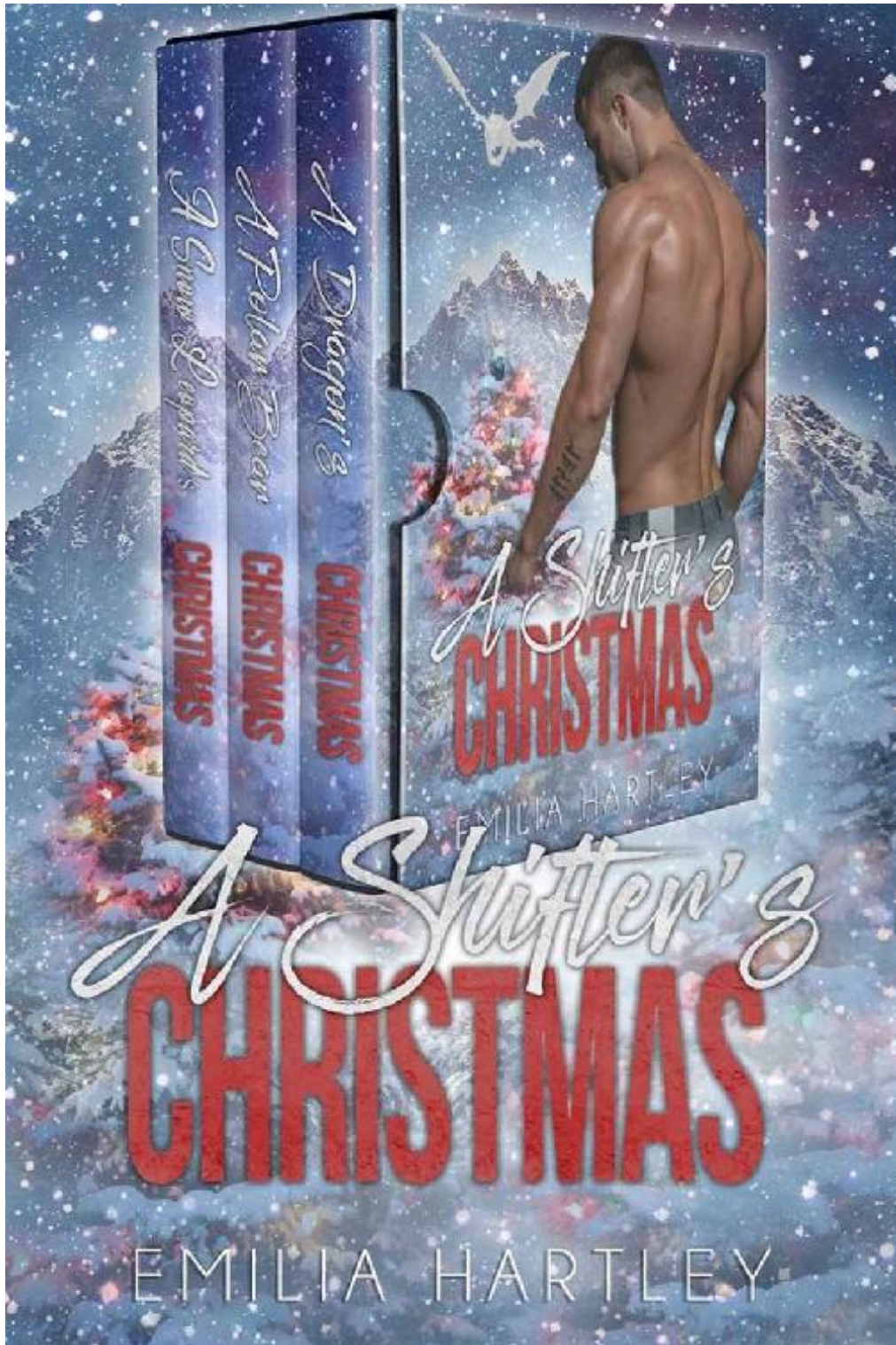
THE LIONS LOYALTY

THE HYENAS HOPE

THE TIGERS LOVE

WILD BEASTS

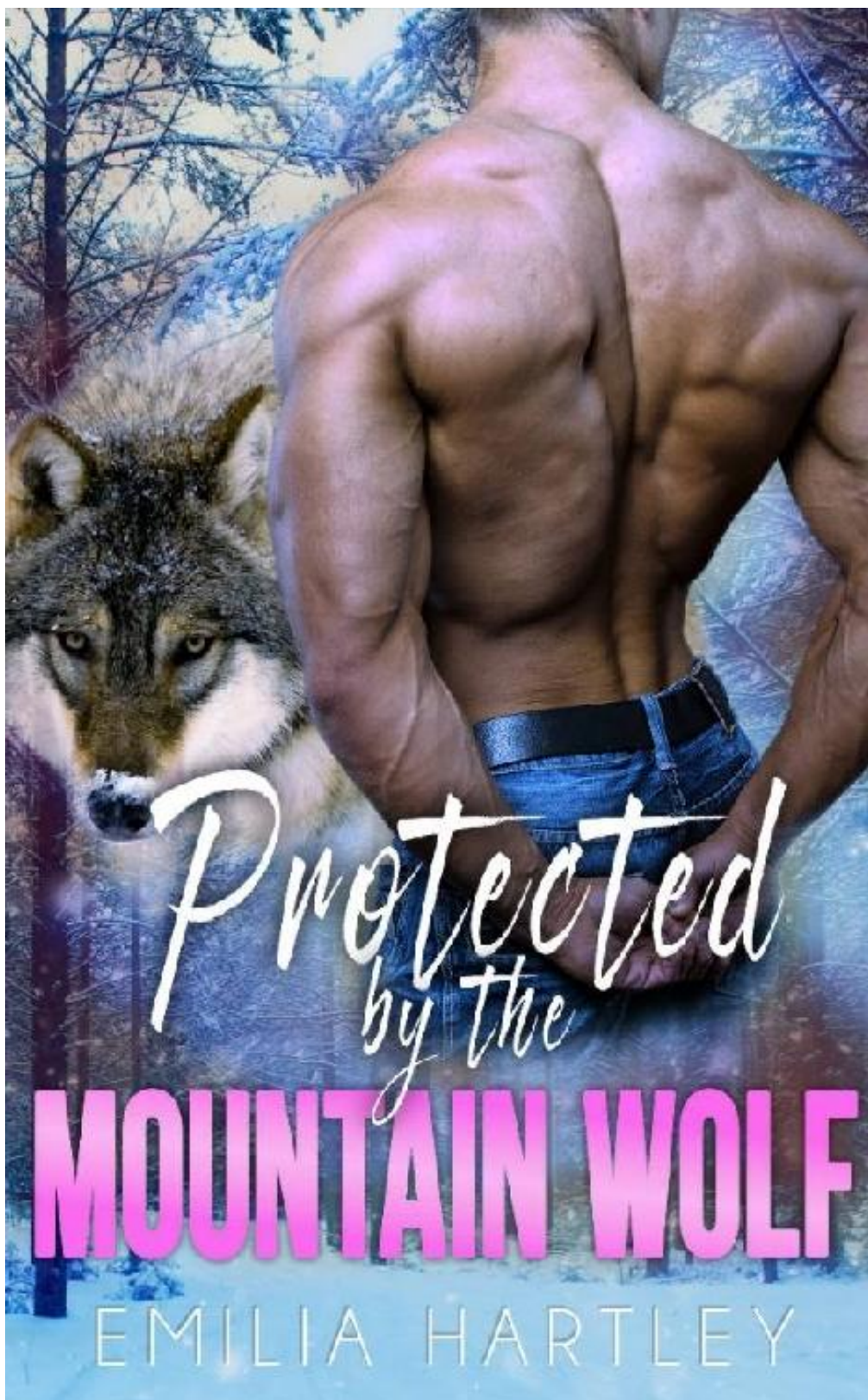
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