



*Dating
Sim
Academy*

Why Choose?



Hearts Pursuit

LYRA WINTERS

HEARTS PURSUIT

LYRA WINTERS

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hearts Pursuit is a standalone book with a happily ever after. It is a whychoose (reverse harem) fantasy romance where the main character is sent to another world. All main characters are in their twenties/early thirties. This story *is* a whychoose romance, which means the main character will not choose between her love interests. There is no MM or FF in this book. The romance focuses solely on the heroine of the story.

Be aware of your triggers, lovely readers. This book contains strong language, bullying (outside harem), prior childhood abuse (MMC's dad), mention of narcissistic mother and sister (FMC's former family), and explicit sexual content.

If you find *any* grammatical mistakes you deem as errors, please fill out [this form](#) or email me at authorlyrawinters@gmail.com, so I can fix the issues. Hearts Pursuit had multiple eyes on it. It has been through my alpha and beta teams, and it has been both edited and proofread, but sometimes little things tend to slip through. This is the best way to report errors to me. Thank you in advance!

Reader's discretion is advised.

To the anime lovers who wish getting summoned to another world would end in finding love with six dreamy men.

This is for you.

GLOSSARY

- **EXP:** Experience; a unit of measurement used to quantify a character's life experience and progression through a game.
- **Heart Events:** Meaningful interactions that provide a moment for the characters to interact whilst focusing on their thoughts and emotions. These can raise or lower the heart-o-meter depending on the other character's reaction.
- **Heart-O-Meters:** A meter of 5 hearts that is filled to determine compatibility.
- **MANA:** Magic or MANA is an attribute assigned to characters within a video game that measures their power to use special magical abilities or "spells."
- **Meet Cute Events:** Events where the character meets their potential love interests and marks whether or not they are a match.



PRIMROSE

My head throbbed as I cracked my eyes open and peered into the gorgeous room that was definitely *not* mine.

The last thing I remembered was coming home from a disastrous date with Chad, the grade-A douchebag my sister had set me up with.

It was a grueling dinner that followed up with him clasping his hands together with a pity-filled expression. “*Listen, Primrose, I only went out with you as a favor to your sister. You’re not bad looking, but you’re nothing like your sis—I mean, uh, you’re just...not my type, is all.*”

It had been a whamming blow to my already-fragile ego.

I wasn’t ugly. I didn’t need Chad from HR at the hospital where my sister was doing her surgical residency to tell me so. But I also acknowledged that I wasn’t as stereotypically beautiful as my sister.

She had white-blond hair that flowed straight down to her lower back with bright blue eyes. I had golden-blond hair that hung in messy waves down to the middle of my back with green eyes. She was five-nine, whereas I was five-three. We’d had plenty of people tell us through the years that where she was stunning, I was *cute*, parents included.

That wasn’t where the differences ended, though. She pursued medicine while I worked as a librarian. She radiated confidence, loved networking, and had her shit together. I was a hot mess, shy, and loved video games.

And I didn't love just *any* video games. I loved dating simulation games. Something my sister and parents found... what was the word...oh, right, disturbing.

"Primrose, why don't you be more like your sister and date real men? Fictional men are purely that. Fictional..."

As if I didn't know that. I preferred fictional men. Thanks, Mom.

Scoffing to myself, I pushed up on the pink duvet I was lying on with my stomach churning.

Fictional men were superior, obviously. Who didn't love falling in love with all of the types of guys you were interested in over and over again? The only downside of dating simulations was that the games always made you choose between the love interests.

Why settle for one love interest when I could have more?

It was poor craftsmanship, honestly. It was 2023. Come on, gaming creators. Catch up to the times.

But now wasn't the time to dwell on that, was it?

Okay, Primrose, think. What did you do after the douchebag left you to get a cab on your own?

I screwed my eyes shut and did a mental rundown of when I got home. I'd locked the door, tossed my keys in the bowl, kicked my shoes off like always, then...I grabbed my portable gaming system and played my absolute favorite game: 'Hearts Pursuit.'

I'd been curled up on my couch underneath a ton of fluffy blankets, and I had played through all of the love interest's routes before...everything had gone blank...and I woke up here.

My eyes shot back open, and a quick glance was all it took for me to tell that this room was not a run-of-the-mill, ordinary room.

Nope.

It was the exact same dorm room that the heroine in ‘Hearts Pursuit’ called home. The same heroine who found love in the most enchanting corners of this whimsical academy.

My heart stuttered in my chest. Had I been transported into my dating simulation?

It was a colossal dorm room, complete with a pristine white desk and a cushioned throne of a chair to match the set in front of the four-post bed. Beside it, a magnificent white dresser stood. The floor? Marble. Not just any marble, mind you—smooth, sleek, and as classy as a black-tie event. The only thing that made it slightly in the realm of cozy was the white plush fluff rug underneath the bed.

And as if that wasn’t enough, on the other side of the room, nestled in its own little Eden, was an open terrarium with a bed of lush, mossy goodness. It was fit for a tiny earth princess.

Though, I couldn’t remember the heroine having a tiny earth princess roommate or there being a terrarium in the room within the game. But it was still a luxurious room, so luxurious that I didn’t understand why it didn’t include an attached bathroom. It was a shame, really.

A sharp gasp left my lips as I brought my hand over my mouth.

Maybe I was lucid dreaming, and I happened to dream up that I was the heroine of my favorite game! That made more sense than being transported into a video game, though, that would’ve been pretty awesome, too.

A loud, technological *pop* resounded through the room as a virtual *welcome* panel popped up in front of me with bright pink letters.

Welcome To Hearts Pursuit: MANA Sim Academy

Primrose,

Think of yourself as the main heroine! You will be attending the enchanted academy with magical prowess, EXP, and MANA.

You have woken up in your dorm room, and your roommate is your guardian. She will teach you everything you need to know about this world and your studies.

Fill up heart-o-meters and trigger the meet-cutes and heart events! But most importantly, *fall in love!*

I blinked slowly at the virtual words in front of me before sitting on the edge of the bed and reaching out to hover my palm over the large green continue button until a loud ding pierced the air.

“Welcome, Primrose!” a small, feminine voice said from in front of me as the panel disappeared.

A shrill scream tore from my lips as I dove underneath the covers on the bed.

I’d definitely been alone when I examined the room... hadn’t I?

When nothing else was said, I peered from the top of the incredibly comfortable comforter to see a leafy green plant standing about one foot tall. The plant looked like a small, humanoid alien with black eyes and fabulous green leaves that hung down like a willow tree’s branches for hair.

Overall, the plant-person was kind of adorable.

Except, she had her arms crossed over her chest with an exasperated expression plastered on her face. “Are you done?”

“Well, excuse me for freaking out for the fact that there is a talking *plant* in front of me!” I tossed the covers off and sat back up, staring at her with caution.

Who knew what a plant-person was capable of.

“I guess your reaction should be expected from a woman who came from a world with no magic,” she muttered before smiling and revealing rows of pretty flowers for teeth. “I’m Leaf, and I’m your guardian and roommate for the days to come. My side of the room is over there. Don’t touch any of my things. If you need anything, you come to me!”

“Do bees ever try to pollinate your teeth?” I blurted the question, but Leaf just studied me silently. “Um, sorry. I mean,

your teeth-flowers are so very beautiful that I just figured insects would want to... Was that a rude question?"

"Yes."

I never knew a plant could look *so* disgruntled. I mean, my parents gave me that look most of the time...and my sister... and most of my acquaintances, actually.

"So, you're my guardian." I cleared my throat and clasped my hands together in my lap. "Care to explain why I woke up here and not in my living room?"

"Think of yourself as the heroine here," she told me.

"So the panel said." I let out a nervous chuckle and ran my hand through my golden hair. "But why am I here?"

"To attend the academy and fall in love, *obviously*." She rolled her black eyes at me. "Now, listen carefully because I don't want to have to explain the rules again." She paused and narrowed her eyes at me as if I'd already caused trouble when I hadn't even gotten out of bed yet.

"Go on," I prompted, waving my hands in encouragement for her to continue.

She smacked her hand on her head before letting out an audible groan. "Classes begin tomorrow. Welcome to MANA Sim Academy! It's a magical academy that helps you learn magic. Magic is like any other skill. If you don't work to learn it, you won't be good at it. That's where EXP, experience, comes in. The more experience you have, the more opportunities you'll come across to learn. This is an academy, after all. Speaking of, you get a stipend for attending. Trust me, it's plenty." She smirked, amusement filling her gaze as she spoke about the game's inner workings. "Now, there are stages to the magical skills you can and will learn. Basic, Intermediate, Advanced, and Specialized. As you reach the levels, you'll earn more and more EXP. EXP also goes up when talking to others, mastering spells, learning new magic, triggering heart events, and increasing Love XP. Questions?"

I shook my head. "I get it."

She nodded. “Good. Maybe you aren’t hopeless,” she murmured the last part. “Your MANA is your magical threshold. It dictates what kind of spells you can cast and how long you can use your magic before needing to rest for it to recharge. Your MANA level will increase as you master spells and learn about magic.”

I raised my hand, and she groaned but motioned for me to speak. “I get EXP and MANA completely. I play a lot of games where that’s built in, but what kind of magic is taught at this academy?”

“Elements,” she quipped.

“Awesome!” I squealed, clapping my hands in an excited rhythm. “This is just like the game ‘Hearts Pursuit’!”

“This isn’t a game,” she snapped, and I held my hands up in surrender. “Now, pay attention. There are three months per quarter, and you will attend the academy for a full year before receiving a diploma for whatever specialized magic you decide on.”

I furrowed my brows. There hadn’t been a specialized form of magic within the game. I didn’t even really notice the educational or magic side of things since I had been more sidetracked with the love aspect. “What kind of specialized magic exists?”

“Lightning, ice, dark, and light magic,” she answered quickly before waving her hand and conjuring a schedule out of nowhere.

It was a class schedule—my class schedule.

**Basic Wind 8AM MWF Air Hall - Room 101 Professor
Zinman**

**Basic Earth 9AM MWF Earth Hall - Room 201 Professor
Fidler**

**Basic Fire 11AM MWF Fire Hall - Room 301 Professor
Shades**

**Basic Water 12PM MWF Water Hall - Room 401 Professor
Rowe**

“This is so cool,” I murmured, excitement thrumming through my veins at the prospect of actually being able to control the elements and use magic.

I’d always dreamed of attending a magical academy. It was right up there on my impossible bucket list.

She waved her hand the opposite way, and the schedule disappeared. “That’s how you will bring up your schedule. Check your stats by raising your hands like this.” Leaf threw her hands up in the air and twirled her stumpy leaf hand. “And say stats.”

“Stats,” I mimicked her, putting my arms up over my head and rotating my wrists. Sure enough, my stats popped up.

An EXP bar and a MANA bar appeared, and my EXP was a whopping *zero*, but my MANA started out at fifty.

There were no hearts though to show my love status.

“What about love? Shouldn’t I have some kind of love stats? A progress bar or something?” I scrunched up my nose.

“I’m getting to that,” she assured me, lowering her hands to her sides.

I did the same, and all of the stats vanished. Nifty.

“Heart-o-meters are love levels with certain love interests,” she explained. “They increase in hearts when talking to your love interests and triggering heart events. The first heart is gained by the Meet-Cute-Event, and if you fail it, you will not progress with them.”

“What?” I exclaimed, hopping out of bed and onto the plushy rug before stepping onto the cold marble floor with bare feet. “That’s totally not fair!”

She blinked at me as if she really couldn’t believe I had said that. “There are five hearts to fill, and each heart fills differently for each love interest. If you respond in a negative manner to a heart event, you can and will lose a heart. If you lose a heart, you have only *one* chance to make it up. You will be seeing heart-o-meters differently than the rest of the world does because of this special condition with your coming here.

You have the opportunity to fill heart-o-meters. You will only be able to see heart-o-meters of love interests who have the potential for you to max out their heart-o-meters. That means you will be matched with your most compatible love interests. Don't take that for granted."

"Woah." I nibbled on my lip and began pacing as I smoothed down the pink pleated skirt I wore. "So how many love interests are we talking here?"

"You have six potential love interests."

My mouth fell open, and I couldn't help the smile that stretched across my face. "Holy noodles, that is *a lot* of men!"

"Uh, yeah." Leaf muttered something under her breath before letting out a steady breath. "Anyway—"

"Six men!" I exclaimed, cutting her off as I bounced on the balls of my feet. "This is the *best* lucid dream ever!"

"Wait, what?" Leaf's eyes widened. "This isn't a dream! Are you stupid or just dense?"

"Excuse you!" I placed a hand over my heart, gasping. My subconscious, or whatever it was in my brain that was controlling Leaf, was so mean. "I am neither, thank you!" Another wide smile blessed my lips again as I mulled over the situation and waved my hand back and forth. "I'll tell you what I am, though. I'm a librarian who spends her days daydreaming about fictional men, both in romance novels *and* in my dating simulation games. And you know what? I'm *proud* of it."

"*Yikes...*" Leaf patted at her leafy hair and glanced away from me. "You're allowed to keep secrets, you know."

"I'm going to let that slide." I crossed my arms and glared at my new roommate guardian. "I'm probably the queen of dating simulations. Okay? This genre of video gaming is my freaking jam. I can play every single route and woo every single character in my games without even glancing at a guide. This one especially, but do you know what I've never been able to achieve, and not for the lack of trying?"

Her plant features scrunched up as if she were suffering from a migraine, something I highly doubted because plants didn't have brains...did they? "What is that?"

"To max out all of the love interest's heart-o-meters at one time. I've always *dreamed* of forming my own harem!" I gushed, excitement filling my tone as I waved my arms around. "And what better time to achieve that than within my dream?"

"Wouldn't that be considered a reverse harem?" she stated dully, as if my dream bored her. "And I told you, this is not a dream, Primrose."

"Right! It would be a reverse harem!" I squealed. "One woman, six men. And I'm the woman!"

The possibility of all those smoking hot characters being mine at once flooded my mind, and I swore drool dribbled down my chin as I bounced around the room in pure anticipation.

"I found the reverse harem, why choose, genre of romance novels within the past two years, you know," I babbled on to my roommate who seemed like she literally couldn't care less. "And I've always wanted the dating simulation games I play to go that route, but they always make me choose," I whined. "It's really not fair. They're all so damn hot, and they're all bringing something to the table, you know? I hate the choosing trope. Give me the why choose trope, you know?"

"No." Leaf heaved a sigh, trudging over to her terrarium area of the room and flopping down on her bed. "I don't know because you *should* choose. Not choosing has never been done before for those finding love in this academy."

"Well, that's about to change." I grinned at her, stopping just short of where her mossy floor started. "Nobody is going to tell me I can't pursue my dream in my dream!"

"How many times do I have to tell you that it's not a..." Cue a heavy sigh. "Dream."

I waved her off before I realized that I didn't have to wait to meet the guys. I glanced down at the academy uniform. It

was just like the game. Pink skirt and white shirt. It was adorable.

I moved toward the floor-length mirror and checked my appearance. I looked the same as I looked every day but lighter, happier, somehow. The only time I would ever look this carefree was in a dream.

Tucking my hair behind my ear, I gave Leaf a flutter of my fingers. “I’ll see you later. I’m going to go find me a love interest.”

“I need to come with you on your first day,” she protested, getting up and dragging her feet as she trailed behind me. “I’m your guardian, after all.”

Slipping on my shoes, I sighed as I beelined toward the door.

“Fine, but stop being so grumpy, or you’ll never help me find love,” I told her, yanking the door open and bulldozing straight into the hottest man I’d ever seen in my entire life.

My body smacked into his, and I grasped for support against his strong, muscular shoulders that bulged under my palms.

Unfortunately, I had so much momentum going leaving the room, that my body propelled me into him harder than I had thought possible.

The force caused him to stumble backward, and his arms wrapped around my waist to hold me up. Our legs tangled together, and we toppled over with me...*landing on top of him.*

PRIMROSE

My heartbeat was in my throat as I straddled this incredibly beautiful man, and my forehead throbbed painfully as I pushed up to get another greedy look at him.

He wore his orange hair a little past his shoulders and pulled it back half-up to show off his impressive jawline and sharp cheekbones.

Gods, he was handsome. No, handsome didn't even cover it.

His pretty golden eyes shone with concern as his lashes skimmed the tops of his cheeks with each blink.

The warmth of his hands were planted on my hips as he seemed to hold me steady from falling over.

"You're gorgeous," I blurted, my face flooding with warmth as his lips curled upward in amusement. "I mean, I'm so sorry for knocking you over!"

Full disclosure, I wasn't that sorry. Being on top of a completely desirable man was not something I was particularly sorry for.

"Don't be," he murmured, moving a hand from my waist to brush his fingertips slightly over my forehead. "Are you okay?"

My gaze flicked to his forehead which was red from smacking heads with me on the way down. *That* I was sorry

for. Then I moved my gaze above his head to the empty heart-o-meter flashing with the words: MEET CUTE EVENT.

My breath caught. I didn't recognize him as a love interest from the game, but he was definitely *my* love interest if that heart-o-meter was any indication. He was also cuter than any of the love interests from the game.

I wondered if I would be getting to know a totally new cast or if he was the only new character.

"Primrose, could you stop being a hussy for a moment, and get off of Alderidge?" Leaf scolded me from the doorway.

"Alderidge," I repeated his name in a breathy tone, feeling something thicken between my legs where I straddled him. "That's a cool name."

"Primrose is a beautiful name," he told me, letting his hand drop from my face before flashing me a brilliant smile. "You can call me Al. I'm the student council president, and I'm your tour guide for the morning. Welcome to the academy."

The heart above his head began to fill a quarter of the way up.

"Al..." I couldn't stop dipping my gaze to his lips. They looked *so* soft. "You can call me Prim."

"Prim...*beautiful*," he murmured.

Leaf cleared her throat. "Off!" she reminded me sharply.

My eyes widened, and I scrambled off him, reaching down and grabbing his hand to help him back onto his feet.

Without thinking much about it, I pulled until his feet were firmly on the ground and reached back to dust the dirt off his ass from the floor—and his ass was toned. "You must really like squats," I mumbled more to myself than him as I stepped back.

Leaf ran another hand down her face, but I could tell she was snickering. "Gods help me."

"Thanks." Alderidge, or rather Al, had a perfect smile in place as he cleared his throat. "Good to see you, Leaf."

“You won’t be saying that for long,” she muttered before smiling at him—a genuine smile. “Not when I’m tagging along with this one. She’s a little...different.”

“Hey!” My mouth dropped as I stared at my plant-roomie with horror. Wasn’t she supposed to be my wing-woman—er, plant?

She waved me off.

I turned to Al with a nervous giggle, sweeping my hand through my hair. “I have no idea what Leaf means. I’m totally normal. Honest.”

He nodded his head sharply. “Right. Of course.” A patterned beep went off in his pocket, and he retrieved his phone. “Excuse me for a moment.”

I spun toward Leaf with a scowl. “What the hell, man? You were supposed to be on my side!”

“I *am!*” she defended, looking as offended as a plant-lady could look, I supposed. “But you can’t go touching random butts,” she switched to scolding me. “That’s considered assault!”

Gasping, I covered my heart with my hand. “I was *not* assaulting him, Leaf! I was dusting off dirt!”

“Off his butt.” She rested her plant stubs on her hips. “Assault, Primrose.”

“Oh, noodles.” I squeezed my eyes tightly shut.

How on earth did I manage to get scolded for assaulting my love interest in my own dream?

“Listen, it’s fine. Definitely apologize, but it should be fine.” She glanced toward where Al was on the phone down the hall. “Unless the heart above his head disappears. Then you’ve lost him.”

I groaned, loudly. “I’m an idiot.”

“Yes, you seem to be.” Leaf nodded.

I scowled at her as Al looked back at us with a sweet concerned expression plastered on his beautiful face.

He hung up the phone and came back over. “Sorry about that. Being student council president of the academy means I don’t get a lot of time off.”

“That sounds hard.” I let out a nervous chuckle and took a hesitant step toward him. He didn’t move away, so I was hoping that meant he wasn’t upset. “Listen, I wanted to apologize for dusting the dirt off your butt. I didn’t even think about it being your butt. Honest. Please don’t be mad at me for touching your butt.”

His polite and put-together expression fell, and he started cracking up with laughter.

Leaf and I shared a quick glance as he finished laughing and straightened up.

“Prim, I’m not mad in the slightest. I appreciate your help with that,” he chuckled, and his first heart filled to the halfway mark. “But I don’t have as much time with our tour as I had expected, so we may want to start now.”

“Sure!” I smoothed down my skirt and grabbed the doorknob to close the dorm room shut behind us. “After you.”

Leaf floated up to eye level. “I’ll accompany you both.”

“The more the merrier.” He grinned, lifting his arm to guide us down the large hall of the dorms with white walls and a tan linoleum. “The dorms are co-ed, so if you ever need anything, I’m in room 424 in this tower. Our tower is called Ice Tower. The other two are Lightning and Dark Tower.”

My heart skipped a beat at his invitation, but I bit my tongue to avoid saying anything inappropriate. Surely he hadn’t meant it the way my dirty mind had taken it.

Leaf shot me a glare that told me I was right in keeping my mouth shut.

“Thanks.” I smiled at him as we made our way out of the dorm. I glanced back to see that the dormitory was made up of three similar concrete towers with green pointed roofs.

I stayed in the middle tower, apparently with Al, and that made butterflies flutter in my stomach.

Manicured grass spread out in a squared area for the front yard of the dormitory.

The game itself failed to embody how whimsical the academy grounds actually were. But I played it enough to know what buildings were on campus.

It was separated by each element. There were four main academic buildings with a glowing magical circle floating above the structures.

Air Hall was in the North, designed in black and white with a middle tower and two adjoining structures off to the side with a gray magic circle.

Water Hall was in the East, designed in blue and white with three towers and a gazebo-type building attached with a blue magical circle.

Fire Hall was in the South, designed in white, red, and magenta with a large dome structure below that was at least three stories and a tower on top with a red magical circle.

Earth Hall was in the West, designed in green, brown, and white with a circular building and two attached smaller structures with a green magical circle.

A stone pathway connected all four elemental buildings with the paths to each structure being fenced in with the element itself. The path to Air Hall had two large trees with a constant tornado circling each of them. The path to Water Hall was lined with floating water with waves splashing up onto the stone. The path to Fire Hall was closed in by flaming trees. The path to Earth Hall was lined with spring trees blossoming with pretty flowers.

A stone fountain stood in the center of the paved walkways, and the water inside seemed to sparkle with magic.

I couldn't see it from here, but I knew there was a sports field between Earth and Air Hall, a training hall between Air and Water Hall, and an Academy Center between Water and Fire Hall.

The dorms were between Fire and Earth Hall, and we walked toward Fire Hall, passing the flaming trees as we

moved toward the building.

“This is where all of your fire classes will be.” Al smiled as he opened the door for me and waited for me to walk in.

Who said chivalry was dead? *I was swooning for this man.*

“Fire magic sounds fun.” I walked inside, and my gaze widened. “Woah.”

Fire Hall had what looked to be fire quartz floors and clay stone walls. Orbs of fire lined the halls, emitting flickering light through the foyer. There were red couches and chairs throughout for study areas, and it was beautiful.

It didn’t look like this in the game, and I had to admit that I liked this style *way* better. It matched the vibe of the element.

“It can be, but it takes a lot to make it safe,” Al said as he walked in behind me and let the door shut. “Fire is chaotic, so controlling it takes a lot of MANA, EXP, and concentration.”

“Oh.” I nodded as we made our way to a door that held a stairwell and up three floors.

Using fire magic in the game, any magic really, wasn’t hard. I just pressed a button. But it definitely seemed like it would take more here.

“Your professor is Shades. He teaches all of the fire magic in the academy, and he’s great as long as you don’t get on his bad side.” He winced, running a hand through his shiny orange hair as we stepped onto the third floor. Even the light from the flames showed how beautifully it shined. “He’s a bit of a hot head.”

“Your hair is really beautiful,” I blurted.

His brows shot up as he played with a lock of it before dropping his arm to his side. “Thank you. Your hair is too.”

“Really?” I smoothed over the top of my hair self-consciously before stupidly blurring out my own insecurity about it. “My sister has this really pretty white-blonde hair, and mine is kind of dull compared to it.”

“I like your color.” He stepped closer and reached out to grab a piece. “It reminds me of butterscotch.”

He smelled of autumn. Cinnamon, nutmeg, clove, and cedar wood invaded my senses, and I inhaled it greedily. Fall wasn't my favorite season, but his scent alone was making me rethink that.

“Nobody has ever told me that before,” I mumbled as I stared into his eyes. I'd be the first to volunteer to get lost in their kind, golden depths. “You smell like autumn, and I think I'm falling—”

A sharp punch in my thigh cut me off, and I whirled on Leaf to see her looking at me like I was dumb. “What was that for?”

“This isn't a game!” She crossed her arms.

“What's this about a game?” Al frowned, his forehead wrinkling. “If you ask me, nothing about this academy is a game...”

“Of course not!” I spun back to him and smiled sweetly. “I know that.”

He nodded and continued leading us down the hall. “I'm sure Leaf explained that the academy lasts for a year and ends with dual classes of your choosing. I'm in the Intermediate classes, so I've already been through Basics. I'm happy to help you if you ever need it.”

“I'd really appreciate it!” I wrung my hands together. “So you've already been here one quarter? How'd you become class president so quickly? Or is there a class president for each class?”

“There's a class representative for each class, but only one student council president. We all work together to make the academy a better place,” he explained. “We have to be excelling in each class to maintain our positions. This elite academy will do great for my educational backing.”

“That's really amazing.” I couldn't imagine all he had on his plate. “I'm sure you've worked really hard, and it shows. You should be proud of yourself.”

He paused mid-stride and stared at me, mouth agape.

I swallowed hard and glanced behind me before meeting his gaze. “What is it?”

“It’s just...nobody has ever outright acknowledged my work ethics before.”

“Really?” I tilted my head. “It’s obvious how much you do. I can’t imagine how rough that is on you. You should at least be proud of it.”

He let out a low chuckle and shook his head as he continued walking. “You’re something else.”

“In a good way, right?” I probed, stretching my legs to keep up with him.

“You have no idea.” He cleared his throat and stopped in front of room 301. “This is where you’ll take Fire Basics.”

“Cool!” I nodded, mentally taking note of where I’d be going tomorrow. “Thanks for showing me around. I really appreciate it.”

He smiled, and dimples appeared on his cheeks. Suddenly, his heart-o-meter filled the first heart completely in. “Anytime, Prim.”

There was an electrifying chemistry between us as we walked back down the stairs to the bottom level.

I’d never been as into the studious archetype as the others, but Al had completely changed my mind. He was *delightful*. In more ways than one, and he had more depth to him than all of the studious types in the games I’ve played combined. I couldn’t wait to learn more about him.

We strode past the open door of the art room on the way out of the building, and my feet practically rooted themselves to the spot as I peered inside.

There was a man with coal-black hair standing in front of an easel controlling fire magic and moving his arms rhythmically as he burnt the paint he’d smeared onto the canvas.

He was painting a wildfire in the mountains at night, and the stars flamed with a glow against the burnt night sky. The flames raged beautifully as they devoured the painted trees, but the scene was standing still even though the fire was constantly moving. It was the most unique magical painting I'd ever seen.

Albeit, the only magical painting I'd ever seen, but still. I would've never thought of using magic to paint or make artwork.

A small gasp of appreciation squeaked out of me, and the man turned toward the door. The flames stayed put on the canvas even though he no longer controlled them, but his icy blue eyes pierced mine.

“Oh, um, hi. I'm sorry for intruding, but that genuinely is the most beautiful painting I've ever seen in my life, and wildfires are bad,” I blurted. “To capture the beauty of one is...really something.”

His dark brow lifted, and his gaze flicked to Al before settling on me again.

He abruptly made his way toward the door. As he did so, a heart-o-meter and the flashing words: MEET CUTE EVENT popped up above his head, and my breath caught.

When he made it closer, he gripped the edge of the door, and I was bathed in the scent of paint and fire, an odd but alluring combination.

I was getting completely entranced with the artist archetype.

His hair was black, but it shined in the firelight, and he was tall and skinny with the most beautiful blue flower creeping up his neck. I wanted desperately to touch it.

He also wasn't in the game, but honestly? Screw those characters. Al and this guy were better than all of the ones from the game combined. I wondered briefly about what my four other love interests were like here, but the one in front of me held my attention the most at this moment.

The heart above his head filled immediately, and my chest swelled with excitement...before he slammed the door in my face.

I jumped back, and my mouth fell open. “Did that just happen?”

Al cleared his throat and glanced between me and the door as Leaf held her stomach from laughing so hard.

“That’s the art room,” he explained. “Extracurricular classes are an option but not required. If you’re interested, you just need to go to the Academy Center and add a class to your schedule.”

“Not necessary.” I pouted, crossing my arms as I glared holes into the door that separated me from one of my love interests. “Who was that?”

Al’s lips twitched in amusement as he picked back up his pace, and I followed alongside him. “That was Wells. He’s in Basics, like you, but he’s been using the art room since I’ve been here. I think he has connections somehow.”

“That painting was stunning,” I admitted begrudgingly as I thought about that brooding painter. Classic archetype, but his type was also *my* type.

I loved *all* the archetypes. Brooding, studious, mysterious, charming, flirty, sporty, give me them all.

But even so, Al and Wells had made my heart flutter in a way no other character had before.

I listened to Al intently as we explored Earth and Air Hall. He showed me to each of the classes that I would be attending and gave me advice on what helps with each element. He said remaining grounded was important with earth while staying elated was important with air.

“Going with the flow is always important with water,” he explained as he led me into Water Hall and down a hall to the right until we reached room 101. “Your room is here.”

The interior had blue floors that were smooth like marble, and the walls were a bright white. It reminded me of the

decorations of those expensive hotels near the ocean, but it was somehow cozier than that.

“Thanks for showing me to my classes.” I glanced up at him and batted my eyelashes at him.

Al would be in my harem no matter what.

A soft blush cascaded over his cheeks. “It’s my job, but I admit I enjoyed this tour more than the usual ones.”

“Oh?” A slow smile spread across my lips. “Why is that?”

“Because I’ve been able to get to know you some more.” He grinned, showing off his dimples.

“The feeling is definitely mutual.”

The second heart on the heart-o-meter filled a quarter of the way up, and I found myself wanting to scream with joy and kick my feet in excitement. The first members of my harem had at least one full heart, and it was only the first day!

“Sorry to interrupt, Alderidge, but we have a problem for the first day of classes with the student council.” A new character, a guy with short brown hair that lacked any meters above his head, rushed from down the hall and stopped when he reached us. “I wouldn’t interrupt a tour if it wasn’t urgent.”

Al’s smile turned into a frown as he sighed. “This is my vice president, Harold. Harold, this is Prim—Primrose. We aren’t exactly finished with the tour, Harold.”

“I know, and I wouldn’t interrupt if the rest of the council wasn’t fighting amongst themselves.” The guy shot me a guilty smile. “Good to meet you, Primrose.”

“You too,” I lied. It wasn’t good to meet anyone who was stealing away my love interest.

Al groaned, running a hand through his hair before he turned to me with an apologetic smile. “I was able to show you to your classrooms, but I wasn’t able to show you the Academy Center or the library where you need to pick up your textbooks.”

I bit down on my lip. He was the studious type, which meant he took his role as the president seriously. Even if we were having a good time, I knew his type would be anxious the entire time about the looming issue with the council.

“Duty calls.” I shrugged with what I hoped was an understanding smile. “I understand, Al. You don’t have to finish the tour. I have Leaf to show me everything else.”

“Yeah?” He glanced at Leaf.

“Yes. I am her guardian.” Leaf nodded. “I’ll handle the rest of the tour.”

Al’s second heart on his heart-o-meter filled to the brim as he smiled at me. “Thank you for being understanding. Text me if you ever have any other questions.”

“Text?” I frowned, realizing the biggest problem. “I don’t have a phone.”

“Of course you do.” He chuckled, flashing those adorable dimples my way. “Everyone gets assigned a phone when they’re enrolled into this academy. It’s how you communicate not only with friends and family but with the professors and the academy announcements. Leaf can show you the phone and get you my information when you get back to your dorm. The phone has a directory for everyone who attends. I’ll be looking forward to hearing from you, Prim.”

My body flushed with heat, and I almost physically swooned as he turned toward his vice president and went to leave. I couldn’t help when my gaze landed on his ass—his very firm, perfect ass—as he walked away.

“I wasn’t expecting you to make such a lasting impression on either of those two.” Leaf smirked at me. “Maybe you’re better at love than I thought.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I snarked at my plant roommate as I daydreamed about both Al and Wells.

I couldn’t imagine how any other love interests were going to top them, but I couldn’t wait to find out.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

“A l and Wells are literally my dream men,” I gushed to Leaf as we walked down the pathway from Water Hall. The water lining the path splashed up and a mist formed from it that sprayed us as we made our way toward the fountain. “Like how can they get any more perfect?”

“You still have four to meet,” she reminded me, rolling her eyes. “Plus, Wells slammed a door in your face. Your standards are pretty low, huh? Considering where you come from, I guess I get it. Men there are—” She stuck her bright green tongue out and fake gagged.

“You’re telling me,” I grumbled and crossed my arms. “Men tend to prefer my sister in real life. Here...they prefer me. But only because I’m the heroine.”

“This *is* real life, Prim,” she told me in an exasperated tone. “You don’t have a sister anymore.”

A pit formed in my gut at the finality of her words, and I paused to glance down at her. “What do you mean by that? Her name is—”

Ice cold water slammed into my chest in the shape of a sphere, drenching my shirt as it burst. A shrill scream tore from my throat as I looked up to see a guy rushing over with a panicked look on his face.

He also had an empty heart-o-meter above his head with the words MEET CUTE EVENT flashing.

The guy was freaking *hot*.

He had messy brown hair that fell against his forehead, almost reaching to his pretty blue eyes. He wasn't as tall as Al or Wells, but he was toned. Since he lacked a shirt, I could see the v-line that led downward even more.

“*Noodles*, that’s freezing.” I shivered. My shirt clung to my skin, and my nipples were tight from the cold and on display since for some reason, I wasn’t wearing a bra. Something I hadn’t even noticed until now.

This game was supposed to appeal to the female’s gaze but whatever.

From the way the guy was staring at my chest, it was pretty obvious he noticed my lack of bra.

Since he took his time staring at my breasts, I took my time staring at his dick that was clearly visible through his thin basketball shorts. The jacket he’d had tied around his waist did nothing to hide it.

It was long, thick, impressive, and rock hard.

See, I could perv on him too.

“Why do you always say noodles?” Leaf asked before my newest love interest who sported an erection made it to us.

“Are you okay? I’m *so* sorry. I’m usually a lot more careful with my MANA balls, but I noticed you walking down the path, and it distracted me.” His sneakers scuffed the stone as he came to an abrupt halt.

He was the sporty type.

“So it’s my fault?” I lifted my brow, crossing my arms over my soaked chest.

I tried to avert my gaze, I really did, but when it stood at attention like that, wasn’t it rude not to look?

He cleared his throat and fixed himself the best he could in his shorts. “I’m definitely at fault here. I should’ve been controlling my magic better, but you are fucking gorgeous. I’m Tate, by the way. And it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“I can tell you think that,” I blurted, forcing my gaze up to meet his. “I’m Primrose.”

He shrugged, a smirk playing on his lips. The heart-o-meter filled slightly. “You’re not wrong. An eye for an eye, right? I saw yours, you saw mine. Primrose is a stunning name. It’s perfect for you.”

“What were you doing, anyway?” I shook my head at his playfulness. He might have been the sporty type, but he was also the flirty type.

“I was practicing for our MANA ball game this weekend. I’m on the team. Actually, I’m team captain.” He winked, untying his jacket from his waist and holding it out to me. “You should come, by the way. I’d love to see you there.”

“Thanks.” I hesitated for a beat before grabbing the jacket and sliding it on. “What’s MANA ball?”

Leaf face-palmed.

He tilted his head, reaching for the bottom of the jacket and zipping it up to cover my breasts. “You don’t know what MANA ball is?”

I shook my head, my legs wobbling at his closeness. He smelled like a salty breeze from the sea. “Can’t say that I do.”

“It’s only the most popular game ever.” He blinked at me like he didn’t quite understand why I didn’t know what it was. “The players form an orb of all four elements per team. The orbs are called MANA balls. Each team tries to destroy the other team’s MANA balls. Whoever does first wins.”

“How do you protect your balls?” I asked, stifling my giggle from my question.

He chuckled, running a hand through his hair. “We use magic. Nothing that could hurt the other team, but we can use it to keep them away from our balls.”

“That sounds really fun.” Excitement thrummed through me. “I’ll be at your game, then.”

“Just look for number one.” He grinned cockily. “I may only be in Basics, but I’m the best on the team. It’s why Coach

gave me the captain position after tryouts.”

“That’s impressive.” I smiled, and his heart filled to the halfway mark.

“That’s not the only thing that I’m impressive at.”

“Oh, I can tell.” My gaze flicked to his dick and back to his face. He smirked wickedly as he tracked it. “You’re definitely both the sporty and flirty archetype.”

His brows furrowed, and he took another step closer, staring down at me with a heated gaze. “Not sure what that means, but you can explain it to me on our date.”

“Our date?” I inhaled his scent greedily. This was everything a dating sim gamer like me could’ve ever wanted. “What makes you think I’ll say yes?”

“The way you’re staring at me right now?” He stared at my lips.

“How am I staring at you?”

“Like you’re going to let me kiss you.”

“Oh, am I?” I bit down on my lip.

Yeah, I definitely was.

“Tate!” some girl squealed, barreling into his side and knocking him a few steps to the side as she wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face into his naked chest.

I stumbled back to avoid her long black hair from hitting me in the face.

She was tall and, if I were being honest, stunning. Even if she was annoyingly in my way.

“Fuck, Caryn, get off of me.” He practically growled the words, and irritation seeped off of him.

The playful guy from a second ago was gone, and a pissed off man was in his place as he stared down at the woman clinging to him.

“Let’s go,” I murmured to Leaf, all attraction I had for the guy vanishing, even if he was a potential match. I had

standards even if it was a dream. “I have no interest in someone who already has a girlfriend.”

“Quickly.” Leaf patted my shoulder as she hovered next to me. “Before—”

“Who is she?” the woman asked.

Tate physically removed her grabby hands off of him and took a few steps away from her. “None of your business, Caryn. We’re not dating anymore and haven’t been for months.”

“Tate, come on, just let me—”

“You fucked my best friend. Plus, you were controlling our entire relationship. I don’t have any feelings for you,” he stated. “Could you stop doing this, please?”

“But, Tate, I still have feelings for you.” She pouted, actual tears springing to her eyes. “We can make this work. We’re attending the same academy.”

“I think Tate made himself clear,” I interrupted, crossing my arms over my chest.

Leaf frowned before muttering under her breath, “Putting your nose where it doesn’t belong, *great*. We totally have time for that.”

Caryn’s gaze snagged on Tate’s jacket that was wrapped snuggling around my form, and she glared at me. “This is none of your business. Go play with someone else’s boyfriend.”

“Are you dumb?” I furrowed my brows in a frown, genuine concern filling me as I slowed down my speech. “You don’t seem to have any trouble hearing so it must be your comprehension level. Let me simplify it for you: Tate doesn’t like you. You had sex with his best friend and cheated on him. You did things he didn’t like, okay? He doesn’t want to date you. Which means, he’s on the market. I can talk to him if I want to.”

She sucked in a sharp gasp. “What—how dare you,” she sputtered.

Tate dissolved into laughter, holding his stomach from laughing so hard. “Oh, my gods!”

She whirled on him. “Why are you laughing? That’s not funny!”

I giggled, covering my mouth before forcing my lips into a thin line. “Sorry. It’s just...can you be normal? Take what he says and listen to it. It’s pretty messed up that you don’t value the word *no*.”

Tate’s gaze widened, and something deeper shined in it. “Woah, Primrose. You’re better than I ever imagined.”

The heart-o-meter filled, bypassing the first and taking up the entire second heart.

Caryn frowned. “Excuse me?”

“Listen, Tate, you’re cute.” I bit my lip and let myself appreciate him for a lingering moment. “But you have a crazy ex. I’m not in the market for dealing with that drama.”

“What?” His face fell, but the heart-o-meter stayed at two hearts. “What about our date?”

“Plan it and lose the ex.” I shrugged before walking away.

Leaf followed me closely as we heard Caryn and Tate fall into a heated argument about yours truly.

I let out a squeal of excitement as we made it out of earshot. “Oh my gosh! That was the coolest feeling *ever*! The game never let me tell off the mean girl before! I don’t see why not because that was so empowering!”

“That’s because this isn’t a game,” Leaf hissed, floating in my face and stopping me from walking further. “That girl, Caryn, is someone you should consider your antagonist. Be careful. She will cause you issues the more you antagonize her. You’re already stealing her man.”

“He’s not her man,” I snapped. “He was clear as day about that.”

Leaf sighed but nodded. “I know. But you should be careful. She’s going to try and ruin you.”

“Let her try.” I glared over my shoulder at her as Tate stormed off, and she chased after him like a lost puppy. “I’d love to take her on.”

“Tate’s been cheated on. How do you think he’ll respond to your harem plan?” Leaf started, leading me toward the Academy Center.

I walked beside her and picked at the sleeve of Tate’s jacket. “I want that achievement of romancing all the love interests...but also, I value consent over everything. If I pursue anything with Tate, I’ll tell him I’m wanting to be involved with more than just him upfront.”

“What if he doesn’t want that?”

“Then I won’t romance all the guys like I wanted.” I frowned. “I wouldn’t ever put anyone in that position if they didn’t want to be in it. Even if he’s just a character.” Referring to Tate as just a character didn’t feel right. I frowned harder. “Speaking of characters, all of these men are new. I’ve never seen them before.”

“Of course you haven’t.” Leaf scoffed. “For the millionth time, this is not a game.”

“What else could it be?”

“A new world.”

My heart skipped a beat. “But I have a world. I’m still alive there. I just fell asleep playing this game. This is a dream.”

“False.” Leaf frowned, but there was concern in her gaze as she glanced back at me.

“That’s impossible.” I shook my head. My subconscious was starting to freak me out. “Let’s focus on the guys, okay? Even if Tate has a bit of baggage, he’s a lot better than any of the men I’ve dated. Tate gave me butterflies, so did Al and Wells, but no other man has before.”

“You’ve never been presented with matches to your soul either,” Leaf muttered as we entered the Academy Center’s polished interior.

Shiny tiled floors and white walls contained a regular Academy Center just like the one I went to at my college. Information desks, places to sit, and a few places to eat filled the area.

“The library is in the back.” She guided me all the way through the center until we came to two large double doors that opened up into a giant library. “We need to talk to someone at the desk to get your textbooks.”

As we maneuvered through the aisles of bookshelves, my foot caught on one of the ladders that stuck a little too far out, and I tripped.

Flailing all my limbs out like my life depended on it, I managed to turn my body, and my back smacked into the carpeted floor.

Pain vibrated through me as I noticed the ladder wobble, and a whole person tumbled down from the top of it.

I didn't get to see the blur of a man as he fell, but I did notice the heart-o-meter. I also noticed the large MEET CUTE EVENT notification above it.

This would be the most painful meet cute yet.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

I squeezed my eyes shut tightly, but pain never came. There was a dull thump and groan before a gradual weight settled on top of me.

Opening my eyes, I saw a freaking angel. The man on top of me looked like he was carved by Heaven itself.

There was no way this wasn't a dream.

Somehow, he'd managed to let his forearms and knees take the brunt of the fall. And he hovered over me in shock at the events that had just unfurled.

He emitted a romantic softness even though his face held sharper features such as his cheekbones and jawline. His bright blue eyes seemed to hold the depth of the sea itself. Long silver hair was pulled back behind his neck, but it fell over his shoulder and brushed against my chest.

"Tulips and rain." I inhaled deeply. "You smell like spring."

A bewildered expression crossed his face before amusement tugged at the corners of his lips. "The night air brings the scent of moon flowers, but it's the goddess of worlds that carries the scent of vanilla. You smell like both, and it reminds me of that part of a famous poem."

"Oh my." My heart lurched to my throat, and heat rose to my cheeks. "I'm sorry for knocking you off your ladder."

"I'm not." He smirked, carefully getting off me and to his feet before offering me his hand. "I don't usually fall first, but

there's a first for everything it seems."

"Make that two of us," I rasped, throat tight as he helped me back up to a vertical position. I was usually more articulate, but this love interest was like a literal *angel*. "You're one of the most attractive men I've ever seen."

His cheeks tinged with pink, and he flicked his ponytail over his shoulder. "Thank you, gorgeous. I'm Cyrus, and you are?"

"Primrose." I bit down on my lip. "I'm charmed."

"Clearly," Leaf coughed.

"Leaf." Cyrus blinked a few times as if just noticing she was there. "Good to see you. I hope all is well."

"You too, Cyrus." She snickered as if she just figured out something hilarious. "Did you know that Primrose starts Basics tomorrow?"

"Oh. *Oh*." His lips parted for a moment before his gaze swept back to me, and there was something blocked off about his demeanor now. "Would you like help finding your textbooks?"

"It's okay. Leaf said I just need to go to the desk." I shrugged. "I can handle that."

He bent down and grabbed a book from the floor that he must've had in his hand when he fell. It was a poetry book, and the cover held a simple white rose with the title '*gorgeous*'.

"Poetry?" I tilted my head with a smile. "I love poetry. Words can be as beautiful as a painting can be." I remembered Wells's painting and wondered what words could be used to describe its beauty and whether or not it could match the depth.

He tensed, straightening up. "Star-crossed without the cosmically destined demise."

"What?"

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “Just some words that came to me.”

“Well, they were beautiful. Reminds me of a forbidden love theme.” I smiled, tapping on the cover of the book in his hands. “You should write poetry if you can come up with something so enchanting on a whim.”

“Forbidden love, indeed.”

Even his voice was angelic. He could write the poetry books, then narrate them. I’d buy it in physical copy and the audio version in a heartbeat.

The heart-o-meter filled that first heart completely, and I couldn’t help but grin wider at him.

Leaf cleared her throat, and it caused Cyrus to clear his as he continued to stare at me as if he were in a trance.

“Right, well, it was lovely meeting you, Primrose.” He bowed his head at me.

“You too,” I murmured as he excused himself.

Once he left, we went to get my textbooks and Leaf successfully dodged all of my questions about Cyrus.

We finally made our way back into the dormitory as I groaned loudly. “You’re supposed to be my guardian! Guardian me. What’s with Cyrus’s change of attitude back there? Am I going to lose him? I don’t want to lose him, Leaf!”

“You’re not going to lose him, drama queen.” She shook her head.

We rounded a corner, and shock jolted through me as I stopped walking.

“Um, Leaf,” I whispered to her, reaching up and rubbing my eyes with the heels of my palms before checking again.

“Yeah, I see it.” She face-palmed again. “You’re a magnet for the most entertaining meet cutes I’ve ever seen.”

Outside the dorm next to ours was my next love interest, and he was naked, pounding on the door. I mean, he had a

towel wrapped low around his waist, but he was *definitely* naked, and the heart-o-meter with the words MEET CUTE EVENT were above it.

He was tall and thin, but he was toned for what muscle he did have. He sported longer blond hair, and as he turned his wide green eyes toward us, he looked mortified.

“I’m going to light your ass on fire, Tate,” he hissed to the door, clutching his towel tighter. “Uh, hey. Ignore me—I mean, this.” He gestured to himself. “My roommate locked me out after stealing my clothes.” He slammed another fist on the door. “A lame prank!”

My gaze trailed down his exposed torso on their own before I forced them back to his eyes. “That’s definitely a lame prank, but at least you’re hot.”

His brows raised, and he gave me a wide grin. “You think I’m hot?”

“Ah, um...” I bit down on my bottom lip with a swift nod. “I do. You’re very attractive, obviously.”

“I didn’t know it was obvious.” His cheeks turned pink as he scratched the back of his head, and his biceps bulged slightly. His first heart on his heart-o-meter filled completely. “But I think you’re stunning since we’re sharing our opinions and all. I’m Colt.”

“Thanks. I’m Primrose.” I smiled, staring at him for a moment before walking closer until the smell of bamboo and coconut became apparent. “Do you want to come into our dorm? I’m sure I can find you something to wear. We’re right next door.” I pointed to our dorm.

“With that, I’ll leave you to it.” Leaf rolled her eyes and floated to our dorm, opening and shutting the door loudly behind her.

“You’re rooming with Leaf? She’s great.” He chuckled awkwardly. “Um, I—”

Colt’s door was wrenched open, and Tate leaned against the door frame with a wild grin. “I thought I heard the voice of an angel. What’re you doing here?”

“She lives next door,” Colt informed him viciously before turning to me with an eager smile. “I’ll go get dressed now, but I’ll see you around, Primrose.”

He passed Tate with a glare as he entered his dorm.

“Sorry, man, I was just getting you back from last time!” Tate told him.

“I left you boxers, at least,” Colt grumbled from within the room.

“I left a towel!”

I glanced down with a snicker. “Well, I better get going. Leaf has some things to tell me before tomorrow.”

Tate stepped forward to block my path with a sheepish smile. “Uh, before you do, I just wanted to apologize.”

“For what?” I tilted my head and put my hand on my hip.

“Caryn. She feeds off drama, and I just wanted to say sorry because she clearly has it out for you now.” He winced. “But you handle yourself well.”

“I’m not worried about some mean girl,” I assured him. I’d dealt with them in the real world, but here I could actually put them in their place without consequence. “Oh, wait, here’s your jacket.” I zipped it down, but my boobs were still very much stuck to the fabric for some reason, so I zipped it back up.

His gaze was heated, but he cleared his throat and glanced away. “Keep it. It looks better on you anyway.”

“I’d like to return it,” I murmured. “I’ll just give it to you tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.” He flashed me a smile and walked me to my door. “So, about that date?”

“Stop leaving Colt outside naked, and plan the date.” I winked, grabbing the door knob and opening it before sliding inside.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

“If you didn’t sleep in, you wouldn’t be running late,” Leaf scolded me, handing me Tate’s jacket.

I scowled at her, snatching the jacket and shoving my arms into it before zipping it up. The plan was to give Tate back his jacket, but it was so comfy I was at least going to get my use out of it while I had it.

“Whatever.” My body was sluggish, and not just from the lack of caffeine and it being a Monday.

I went to sleep last night, curled up in bed, and to my absolute shock, I woke back up here.

I’d never fallen asleep in a dream before, and I definitely never woke up in a dream before. I didn’t know if I necessarily believed Leaf when she said this wasn’t a dream, but I knew something was off. I couldn’t even remember what I was doing in the real world before I found myself here at the academy.

Memories that were so fresh had turned muddled.

“Remember to check your schedule if you get hung up. You can message me as well if you need anything,” she told me.

“I know.” I waved her off before pausing at the door. “Hey, I have a question.”

“What is it?”

“You weren’t a character in the game, so how are you here?” I glanced back at her. “And why aren’t you coming with me to class?”

She frowned. “I’m your guardian in this world, Primrose. I’m here to make sure you fall in love and have a great start here.”

“But you’re my roommate. Aren’t you a student as well?”

She shook her head. “I’m your guardian. Think of me as your guardian angel. I believe that is what your kind calls us.”

“But you’re a plant.” My brows furrowed together. “How can you be an angel? Are there angels in the game now, too?”

“Primrose,” she said sharply. “This is not a game. You are not dreaming. And not everything is as it seems. Your world had angels too. Whether or not it was known to you, I’m not sure it matters. Go to class. You don’t want to be late for your first day of classes. You still have a meet cute event to trigger.”

I bit down on my lip, wanting to grill her more. How was this not a game with all of the gaming aspects? I couldn’t deny how real it felt, but wasn’t that lucid dreaming? It felt real. Or was that another type of dreaming?

This entire experience made little sense. Plus, I needed a freaking latte, stat.

Turning back around, I fled the dorm room and trudged across campus to Air 101. The classroom was a typical classroom just like the ones I’d been in my entire life...I think. I didn’t know why I expected it to be different somehow, but I did.

It was a magic class. That’s definitely different than my usual.

A familiar blond caught my eye at the front, talking with the professor. Colt looked just as attractive now that he was dressed as he did with only a towel.

I grinned, walking to the empty seats of the front row and sitting down behind where he was.

The professor was a woman, middle aged, with blonde hair and golden eyes. She reminded me a lot of Colt, actually. They had the same kindness in their demeanor.

Colt glanced over his shoulder as I smiled politely at the professor. “Primrose! I was hoping to catch you before everyone else came in.”

“Oh?” I raised a brow, setting my bag in front of my feet. “Why’s that?”

“I—ah—wanted to thank you for your help yesterday.” His cheeks turned pink. “I appreciate your attempt at making that situation not end-of-the-world-embarrassing.”

Huffing a laugh, I shrugged. “It’s not your fault your roommate pranked you.”

“Maybe not, but the girl I’m crushing on saw me almost naked.” He chuckled, running a hand through his hair. “That’s a blow to the ego.”

“Not when you’re that hot almost naked,” I muttered under my breath before smiling. “We just met yesterday,” I reminded him.

His grin widened. “That’s all I needed to know I like you.”

It was my turn to blush.

“Tate pranked you again?” The professor crossed her arms. “You two have to stop pranking each other all the time, and I really didn’t need to know about your half-naked adventures.” Her gaze lingered on me, and her lips twitched as if she were holding back a laugh. “I created him, so I apologize for any transgressions he may have done.”

“I didn’t start the prank war this time, Mom,” Colt whined, coming over and sitting down beside me as other students started to file inside. “But this is Primrose.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” I flashed her a smile that she quickly returned. “You created a lovely spawn.”

“Wonderful to meet you, Primrose. My lovely spawn texted me about you last night. You must’ve made some impact.” Her eyes flicked teasingly toward her son.

“He definitely made an impact on me,” I murmured, making him blush harder as more students came and sat in the seats.

Since all Basic students were in the same class, it meant Caryn, the mean girl, and two of her friends got to glare daggers at me as they walked in and sat in the back row.

However, on the bright side, Wells—the super-talented but brooding artist that slammed the door on me yesterday—was also in attendance.

His icy gaze met mine long enough for a splash of pink to form on his cheeks, and he ducked his head down and sat on the last seat in the front row where I could no longer see him.

A chill seared down my spine as the feeling of being watched crept in. I glanced around, but the only people staring at me were the mean girls. Their glares didn’t warrant that reaction, though.

I pursed my lips and turned to Colt. “Where’s Tate? Shouldn’t he take this too?”

Colt nodded. “He’s in an emergency MANA ball practice apparently. There’s a game this weekend that was just announced.” His lips frowned slightly. “He talked a lot about you last night.”

“He did?” I smirked, leaning closer. “Did you?”

His cheeks brightened with red. “Mom already ratted me out with that, but can you blame me? I like everything I’ve seen from you.”

“But that’s not much,” I murmured as an odd sensation encompassed me.

He was probably only interested because he was a love interest, and I was the heroine. If I were a side character, he probably wouldn’t spare me a glance.

“Trust me, it’s enough. There’s just something drawing me to you, and I would bet MANA that it’s divine intervention.”

Clearing her throat, Colt’s mom greeted the class. “Good morning, everyone. I trust you found our location easily.

Welcome to Air Basics. I'm Professor Zinman, and I'll be your instructor for air magic during your time at this academy."

She smoothed out her dress and smiled. "Every week in Basics, you'll master a spell, aside from when you have mid-terms and finals. Air magic has been in existence as long as the other three elements. They cannot exist without the other in some capacity so it's vital that you learn the basic foundation and be able to control each element before you can learn one of the specialized magics."

Her gaze swept through the class. "Does anyone know what kind of career one could maintain with an air, or better yet, lightning or ice magic mastery?"

Colt's knee bumped mine as he held a folded-up half piece of paper between the knuckles of his index and middle finger. His face never left the front of the class, but his kissable lips curved in a smug smirk.

I plucked it from his hands and unfolded it.

You, me, cafe date after classes?

My heart fluttered, and I hid my smile behind my palm, planting my elbow on the desk.

I nodded my head, but Colt made a scribbling gesture with his hand. Stifling a giggle, I wrote back on the paper:

Yes.

Then I put the paper on his desk.

"Colt?" His mom crossed her arms and gave us a sharp look.

"An adventure guide or a Park Ranger. Knowing those magics would be a great benefit somewhere in nature," he quipped.

"Very good. Anyone else?" She scanned the class.

"Storm chaser!" a student in the back shouted out.

Professor Zinman smiled and nodded. “Good. There are a lot of ways this magic could assist in your overall career. For example, being in law enforcement or even something as simple as jewelry making can be made easier with air.”

Colt’s smirk grew into a downright gleeful smile, and he tucked the note into his pocket before sending me a thumbs up.

I bit my lip to contain my excitement.

“Today we’ll be learning the spell: Advanced Hearing...” Professor Zinman jumped headfirst into her lesson, and I loved learning about it.

Once I mastered this spell, eavesdropping would be a breeze.

Professor Zinman asked what the spell could be used for in the workforce, and I told her being a Personal Investigator would be ideal. Surprisingly, that career path was more common than I’d expected. Oddly, it’s something I might’ve been interested in.

“We’re going to learn this spell together as a class today,” she explained. “Wednesday you’ll be working in a group then individually on Friday. Since air is your first element to be taught, let’s start with the basics. Does anyone know how to access air magic?”

Professor Zinman pointed to the back of the class, and Caryn answered, “Staying relaxed and going with the flow.”

She tilted her head. “I can see how you think that, but that’s actually true for water. Anyone know for air?”

I raised my hand, and she nodded to me. “To stay elated and positive.”

Truth be told, I only remembered because Al told me, and I’d remember anything that man told me.

“Yes!” Professor Zinman grinned. “That’s very important because magic is connected to our emotions. The more positive you are, the more wind will be receptive to you. Great job, Primrose.”

I smiled, feeling Caryn's glare digging into the back of my head.

Take that, you mean girl.

Colt's foot knocked against mine. "Good answer."

"Thanks." I tapped mine against his, loving the reassurance he brought me.

"I want you to think about something that makes you happy and let the warmth fill you," she instructed.

"That's easy when I'm sitting next to the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen," Colt whispered, and my cheeks heated.

He was right. It *was* easy.

Without prompt, Al, Colt, Cyrus, Tate, and Wells popped into my head. Specifically, all of them together—in my harem of beautiful men. I was only missing one more.

I could feel Caryn's glare searing into me, but with it, I felt another stare burning into me that made my heart race. It was odd, but the feeling made me happy.

"Now, focus on that feeling in your chest. Let it lift your magic, and I want you to focus it on your ears," Professor Zinman said, and I did just that. "Then repeat the spell's name. Advanced hearing."

Oddly enough, accessing magic—at least, air magic, was more natural than I had expected.

"Advanced hearing," we all murmured.

My ears whirred, and suddenly, I could hear *everything* in the room. The sound of Colt's breathing and the distinct sound of a rapid heartbeat while that feeling of being watched—admired—set in again.

I went to turn around to look at the source, but Professor Zinman clapped her hands together. "Awesome job! I can see the traces of magic in the air already. Now, let's jump into the history of that spell..."

My MANA ran out as I listened to that heartbeat until I couldn't anymore. I barely heard anything Professor Zinman said about the history. Something about spies using it in a war, which was super freaking cool.

Only, I was more focused on the fact that there was an unknown character making me *feel* something. Specifically, happiness. Only by staring! They had to be my last love interest, but I didn't see a heart-o-meter above the head of anyone that I hadn't already met in the class.

The hour passed by quickly, and then class was dismissed. Colt hung behind, and I left the classroom after waving bye to him.

But I should've known. The moment the heroine was away from her love interests, the mean girl swooped in. It was like classic Mean Girl 101, and clearly, this mean girl had aced that class. But if Leaf was right, and this was the antagonist, it made sense that she would've.

Caryn wasted no time. As soon as I rounded the corner of the hallway, she and two friends were waiting for me and backed me against the wall. "Tate's mine. Stay out of my way, and mind your own business. Colt's cute. Take him, but leave Tate alone."

My lips parted slightly, and I crossed my arms as I leaned my back against the wall. "Tate's his own person and can make his own decisions. Colt *is* a cutie, but so is Tate. Why can't I have both?"

Caryn blinked a few times as disbelief crossed her features. "Both?"

"Slut." The girl beside her scrunched up her nose.

Both of her friends looked exactly like Caryn herself. Black hair of different lengths, tall, but with different eye colors.

"Dana." The other friend elbowed the one that called me a slut.

"What, Chelsea?" she hissed to her friend.

“Yeah, Dana, why are you slut shaming?” I tilted my head.

“Sluts should be shamed,” Caryn interrupted. “But you’re just messing with me, and you better stop messing with them. Colt and Tate have been friends for years. You don’t know them like I do. The moment they realize you’re playing with them, they’ll drop you so fast your head will spin.”

I lifted my hand and glanced down at my cuticles. I needed to do something with them. Maybe I could paint my nails pink or burgundy like the game’s logo. Sighing, I met her gaze again. “I’m not playing with them. I’m interested in both Colt and Tate, and I’ll make sure they both know that. If they don’t like it, then that’s that. But it is their decision. Not yours.”

Caryn sputtered, and I could see the wheels turning in her head as she tried to form a coherent retort. Instead, she reached out and grabbed Tate’s jacket that was currently on my body. “That’s not yours. That’s Tate’s, and you’re *stealing* it!”

She was yelling now, and we’d attracted quite a few students’ attention.

“Get your hand off me before I make you,” I spoke with my voice barely above a whisper.

Fear crossed her eyes, but she didn’t let go.

I wrapped my hand around her wrist as tightly as I could and yanked her off me with a firm pull.

She let out a screech, moving her hand away from me and clutching it dramatically to her chest as tears filled her eyes. “Ow! First, you steal Tate’s jacket, and now you’re attacking me?”

I actually wanted to punch her now. If I knew how I’d light her hair on fire. I couldn’t wait to learn fire magic.

A strong scent of paint filled my nostrils as Wells stepped in front of me to block me from her and her posse. “Your yelling is giving everyone a headache. Just leave her alone. Everyone saw you grab her first.”

Holy noodles. His voice was low and raspy, but so eloquent at the same time. I loved every bit of it.

“But she *stole* Tate’s jacket,” she protested. “Why is she getting away with that?”

I rolled my eyes and peeked over Wells’s shoulder. “I didn’t steal his jacket. He gave it to me to cover up after he soaked me with a MANA ball and my boobs were on display. I’m wearing it so I don’t forget to give it back today. Not that it is any of your business.”

She gasped, opening her mouth to reply, but I held up my hand and stepped beside Wells. “Just go.”

Caryn’s eyes narrowed at me, but she glanced at Wells before pivoting on her heels and walking away with her friends in tow.

I glanced over at Wells’s beautiful face. My gods, he was stunning. “Thanks for stepping in,” I murmured, turning to walk away, but he caught my arm.

“What’s your name?”

“Primrose,” I murmured, focusing on how good the warmth of his hand felt over my arm.

“I’ll walk with you to our next class since you’ve seemed to paint a target on your back.” He let go of my arm and glanced away with his jaw tightened. “If that’s okay with you, that is.”

“Of course.” I grinned, my heart racing at the fact that not only did he step in, but he was walking me to the next class.

His jaw muscles loosened as he gave me a brisk nod.

I didn’t know what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn’t his lack of conversation. Though, what could I expect from a love interest that slammed a door in my face?

Earth Hall was full of stone. Stone walls and floors, and even stone chairs and couches.

We walked side by side, but the most exciting thing that happened the entire walk was that our fingers brushed together once we reached for the door handle at the same time.

Wells's face beamed red, but he opened the door for me anyway.

When we made it to the classroom, Wells abandoned me for the back row without so much as a glance my way.

I sighed, running a hand through my golden hair as the prickling feeling of being watched set in again. Scanning the room, I noticed Tate waving his arm in the second row and pointing at the seat next to him.

He was adorable, that much was certain.

I shook off the feeling and made my way through a few students and plopped down next to Tate. "How was practice?"

He tilted his head, a teasing smile on his lips as he drummed his fingers on the desk. "How do you know I had practice?"

"Colt told me." I shrugged off his jacket and leaned back in the chair as I plopped it on his desk.

"Colt?" Tate's lips curved downward as he hesitated before grabbing it. "I told you that you could keep it."

"Yeah. We sat together in Air Basics," I explained as Colt made his way into the classroom and waved at us before coming and sitting down on the other side of me. "Oh, and your ex cornered me in the hall and made a scene over that jacket. You can keep it."

"She did what?" Colt's brows rose. "I'm sorry. I should've walked with you."

"It's fine." I glanced over my shoulder, and my eyes connected with Wells's before I looked back to the front. "Wells walked with me."

"Wells?" Tate frowned, glancing at my brooding artist who didn't yet know he was mine.

"That's good," Colt replied without missing a beat. "I'm just glad you didn't walk alone."

"So when are you going to let me take you on that date?" Tate asked, crossing his arms as he leaned back in his chair.

His jacket was still in his hand.

“Whenever you plan it,” I shot back.

“You’re letting Tate plan a date?” Colt cracked up. “The same Tate who took a girl to the dentist on a first date?”

“You did what?” I looked at him in horror.

Tate scowled. “My tooth was hurting!”

Colt waved him off. “She already agreed to a date with me later at the cafe, but I should plan a dinner instead. I’m the romantic. I’ll plan a candle-lit evening or something like that.”

“Stop stealing my date, man!” Tate glared at his friend. “I wasn’t going to take her to the dentist.”

I could feel Caryn’s glare on us, and honestly, if he’d taken her to the dentist, I understood it.

I stifled my giggle behind my hand. “Why don’t you both take me on a date?”

They both whipped their heads toward me with wide eyes, but both of their heart-o-meters filled slightly.

“Good morning, class!” Professor Fedler clapped his hands to gain our attention. “Welcome to Earth Basics. We’re going to jump straight into things. Earth magic is accessed by remaining grounded...”

Professor Fedler jumped straight into things, and like in Air Basics, we learned the spell as a class.

He taught Sense vibrations, which was actually really cool.

It was getting more difficult to focus, though, because that mystery feeling of being watched was beginning to increase.

Granted, I had miss mean girl glaring at me with her friends the entire lesson. I’d also caught Wells staring at me once, but that one made me happy.

What wasn’t very good was that the guys were acting almost *jealous*. Which was a huge no! There would be no jealousy in my harem because I’d divide my love for them equally.

A jolt of something shot down my spine at the thought of love.

I'd been so fearful of it in the real world yet so open to it here. It felt safe here for love somehow.

“Do you guys know Al?” I murmured my question to Colt and Tate as the professor explained more of the history behind the spell.

Again, dating back to some war. Magic was useful for conflict, apparently.

“Al?” Tate furrowed his brows.

“Do you mean Alderidge?” Colt folded his arms over his desk.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Of course,” they answered at the same time. “He’s student body president.”

I tilted my head. “Do you like him?”

“Sure, I guess.” Colt nibbled on his pouty lip as he toyed with a strand of his pretty blond hair.

“Why? Do you?” Tate’s gaze widened in horror.

Excitement rushed through me. “Of course. I like Wells, too.”

“What about us?” Colt wiggled his brows suggestively.

“Of course I do.” My lips spread into a smile as I winked at them. “I like all of you. My plan is to form a harem—reverse harem, really—with all of you, plus another unknown member.”

Their eyes widened exponentially before they slid their gazes to each other.

I held my breath, waiting to see their reaction.

They both burst into roaring laughter before covering it with a coughing fit to not get in trouble.

It didn’t work, though. The professor definitely noticed.

“If it’s you I’d be with, count me in,” Colt answered as they sobered up from their laughter.

“I don’t like sharing, but since you’re being so transparent and it’d be with my best friend, sure.” Tate shrugged with a boyish grin. “I’m on board.”

Two of my men were down for my dream, but why did I have a sinking feeling that they didn’t think I was serious?

How much more transparent did I have to be for these guys?

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

Caffeine was my own brand of lifeblood in the real world, and apparently, I'd carried that addiction across the dreamscape. Exhaustion sludged through my bones as I trudged through the Academy Center for a sweet, sweet latte.

Gods, I *hoped* they had lattes here. Then again, it was my dream, and it wouldn't be a dream without lattes.

We had an hour between Earth Basics and Fire Basics, so I had time to kill. Colt had to go help his mom with something while Tate had MANA ball practice. Wells booked it out of the classroom before I could stop him, and I couldn't find Al anywhere.

I needed to remember to text him. I wanted to ask him on a date.

I went to the cafe and ordered a vanilla latte with immense delight that it was an option.

The feeling of being watched subsided after class. It was almost disappointing rather than relieving because, you know, something was clearly wrong with me.

"Here you go," the lady passed me a latte from the cafe.

Warmth seeped into my hand as I grabbed the cup, more than grateful for the caffeine. "Thank you."

Turning, I locked my gaze on a small couch next to a window that looked extra comfy. I still had almost the entire hour to kill, after all.

What better way than people-watching and sipping my latte? Maybe I could text Al while I was at it.

Moving forward, I picked up speed toward my newly chosen spot when someone stepped into my path.

I collided with them.

Searing hot liquid splashed all over me, and I yelped as coffee scalded the skin of my torso through the white shirt.

At the same time, my hand crushed my precious latte, popping the lid off. Hot liquid sloshed up and doused the man that I crashed into.

Gasping, my mouth stayed open in shock.

My lifeblood gone, just like that.

“Shit, are you okay, little rose?” a deep voice asked.

Glancing up, I snapped my mouth shut.

The man had a heart-o-meter and the words MEET CUTE EVENT flashing above his dangerously attractive head.

The first heart was already full, and all I’d done was spill coffee on him. The bar was on the floor for him, clearly.

And did he call me little rose?

My heart swelled in my chest as a cozy warmth spread through my veins.

I couldn’t even pay much attention to my burning chest.

I opened and closed my mouth a couple of more times, like a fish, because that was surely attractive, as I locked eyes with him.

He had the most beautiful, almost invasive, purple eyes. He’d parted his black hair that shined with violet highlights in the light down the middle with two strands from each side brushing against his forehead.

Noodles, his lips looked softer than anything.

“I’m a rose.” I stuck out my hand for him to shake before mentally facepalming. “I mean—I’m Primrose. Obviously, I’m not a rose. My roommate’s a plant, though.”

Oh my gods, I was blowing it.

“I know,” he murmured, eyes flicking to my lips and back to meet my gaze slowly. A very faint shade of pink cascaded over his cheeks. “We have classes together, I mean.”

“You called me little rose, and that’s probably the cutest thing anyone’s ever called me before.”

His lips curved upward in a satisfied smile. The second heart of the heart-o-meter filled completely. “You’re the singular most beautiful person I’ve ever seen. Your name is unique, and the nickname came to me when I heard someone call you by Primrose.”

“You’ve been watching me,” I breathed out.

The color drained from his face, and he glanced down at the puddle of delicious caffeine at our feet. “Why don’t I clean this up and get us some more coffee? You should go clean up. We can meet back up at the sofa you were eying.”

My brows furrowed. “How’d you know I was eying that spot?”

“I’m Raiden.” He ran a hand through his hair with a nervous chuckle. “And I’ll be back with your vanilla latte and my espresso.”

He turned and walked away before I could process the conversation fully.

How’d he know I ordered a vanilla latte? Sure, it was obvious it was a latte, but...

Cleaning up in the bathroom was easier than I thought it’d be since I had grabbed an extra shirt this morning, just in case. Tate had ruined the first shirt, and Raiden the second.

Soon enough, my butt was planted on the sofa as Raiden strolled over with two coffees in hand.

Two filled hearts flashed above his head as he handed me my latte. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” I took the cup, and my fingers brushed against his. “Care for a coffee date?”

He jerked his hand back and plopped down beside me with the two contradicting actions. “Yes.”

“What do you drink? Espresso?” I leaned over and sniffed his cup. A strong scent of coffee emitted from it, and I scrunched up my nose. “No flavor?”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Espresso *is* a flavor.”

“A bitter one.” I sipped on mine, and a blast of frothy vanilla coated my mouth. Swallowing, I let out a dramatic moan. “So sweet.”

Raiden’s body stiffened, his spine seemingly clicking straight. “Sweetest sound I’ve ever heard.”

Whipping my head toward him, warmth bloomed on my cheeks. ‘Hearts Pursuit’ wasn’t a spicy game, but I was definitely going to be making it one. “I’m sure you could make a sweeter sound than that.”

A small almost whimper tore from his throat as he turned his head forward and took a sip of his drink. “What’re you studying?”

“Honestly?” I nibbled on my lip. “I’m not sure. It’s almost as if I just woke up here without any recollection of my life at all.”

“I feel that.” He blew out a steady puff of air.

I highly doubted he understood that I meant literally.

“What’re you studying?” I asked him the question back.

In the games, the characters always had their backstory in their character information panel. This dream didn’t come equipped with that feature so I’d have to figure their stories out on my own.

An odd fuzzy feeling flushed over me, and I took another sip.

Raiden’s gaze hardened as he kept his head forward, and the muscles in his jaw bunched up. “Not sure. My father sent me here just to get me out of the house. Sending his only son

to a prestigious magical academy like this one kept his precious name in high society gossip.”

“So you don’t know what you want out of coming here?” I lowered my cup and rested it in my lap. “That doesn’t seem fair. Did you even want to come here?”

He glanced toward me with a guarded expression. “Nobody’s ever asked what I wanted before, let alone if I wanted this.”

“Do you?” I swallowed a lump that formed in my throat. “Want to be here, I mean.”

His lips spread into a slow smile as he kept eye contact with me. “I do now. Besides, I’ve always wanted to explore dark magic.”

“Dark magic.” I hummed, taking another sip. “Leaf told me that was a specialized magic. Is it like sacrificial offerings and blood-covered blades or something?”

His brows furrowed, and his forehead creased. “Why would it be? Dark magic is fire and earth magic combined, and it focuses on the in-betweens in the world. Shadows and stuff like that.”

“Oh.” I forced a chuckle, running a hand through my unruly hair. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize. Where I come from, it means something different.”

“Where you come from?” More confusion lines formed in his expression.

“Ah.” I took a few sips. “It’s just a...dream I had.”

“I know what it’s like having dark, unnerving dreams,” he murmured, his face falling. “I hate that you’ve experienced it.”

Lances of empathy and worry shot through my chest. I reached up and rubbed the middle of it as I stared at the sadness on his handsome face.

Real emotions for him flooded through me, just like with the other guys. But seeing that haunted expression on him?

It made me think that this may *not* be a dream after all. But how would that be possible?

The rest of our coffee date turned quiet as we sipped on our caffeinated drinks.

Raiden and I walked to Fire Basics side by side, our hands brushing against each other's ever so often. The butterflies swarming in my belly had migrated to my heart. I hadn't been this giddy since middle school and the guy I liked asked for my number.

Granted, he'd only asked for it because he wanted to use me to get to my sister.

But Raiden and the rest of the guys weren't trying to get to her. They didn't even know she existed. Even if they did, I had a feeling they wouldn't treat me like all the other guys in my life had.

When we made it into the classroom, Colt and Tate waved to us from the front. There were a few empty seats still by them.

"Sit by us?" I smiled, waving my arm toward Colt and Tate.

Raiden shook his head before he grabbed my hand softly and placed a note in my palm. "I'll catch up with you later, little rose."

Disappointment stirred in my gut as I watched him move to the back row.

Curling my hand around the note, I noticed Wells a few seats from where Raiden sat, but he ducked his head down when he noticed me.

I forced myself to walk toward Colt and Tate, wishing that all four of them could've sat together so I didn't have to choose who to sit by.

I would have to figure out a way to seat everyone together.

"Sit between us." Colt slapped the seat between him and Tate a couple of times.

“Thanks for saving me a seat.” I plopped down between them.

“Who was that guy?” Tate asked, his gaze searching mine.

“Raiden.” A soft smile spread across my lips. “He spilled espresso all over me because I ran into him, so we had coffee together.”

“Coffee together?” Tate tilted his head. “Like a date?”

“Are you okay?” Colt interjected, sending a warning glance to Tate. “Espresso is hot.”

“My skin is a little pink from where it hit.” I trailed my finger down my shirt and over my tender skin. “But it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“I’m glad you didn’t get hurt.” Colt’s gaze held sincerity as he rested his chin on his hand.

Glancing down, I opened my palm and read the note Raiden had given me.

*Thanks for spending time with me.
I enjoyed your company more than you
know, little rose.*

Internal squeal.

Could he be any more romantic? I had already fallen for him.

Glancing over my shoulder, I met Raiden’s piercing gaze and smiled.

His heart-o-meter flashed as he sent me a smile back.

“Hello,” the professor greeted, and I turned back around to face the front. “I’m Professor Shades, but you can drop the title and call me Shades so we don’t waste the time it takes to say that mouthful.”

He looked like he was in his late thirties with red hair that reminded me of vibrant flames. I wondered if he dyed it that color to match the element or if it was natural.

“Fire is the strongest element, but it’s also the hardest to control,” he dove right into it. “How does one control fire?” He paused before nodding to the back.

“You don’t,” Raiden answered without a beat of hesitation. “You work *with* it. Find a balance. If you try to control fire, it will ultimately control you.”

Professor Shades’s lips curved upward. “Very good. We’ll be working on finding that balance during Basics. Remember that fire drains MANA quicker than any other magic type. It’s why control is so important.” He paused. “What’s fire’s weakness?”

“Water!” Caryn’s voice was sharp.

Shades’s smile faded, but he nodded. “Refrain from calling out without raising your hand, but yes. Water is the biggest weakness, but air can be as well. The elements are hazardous to each other as much as they can be beneficial.”

Professor Shades sat on the edge of his desk. “We’re going to be learning the spell for Heat as a collective. Focus on your shirts with a fierce control of desiring it to heat. Air focuses on happiness, water focuses on letting go of control and going with the flow, and earth is the easier magic with being practical about what you want and manifesting it. Fire is different. You need to harness a desire for this magic to work, but you need to do so with control in mind. Desire and control are finicky together, but with practice, it can be mastered.”

I sucked in a focused breath, imagining my shirt heating up. A chaotic sort of magic vibrated through me as I did.

“When you’re ready, state the word *heat*.”

“Heat,” the class stated together.

My shirt heated against my skin, almost too hot, and I winced. My MANA levels plummeted quickly.

“Good. Focus. Don’t overdo it, and don’t try to over-control the magic. This spell is more useful than you’d think...” he continued on with his lesson.

Colt was a natural with it, and Tate could do better than me even if it were obvious that he didn't enjoy it very much.

I struggled with getting the magic to heat the way I wanted it to, but practice made perfect, right?

Fire Basics was straight to the point, and it was over quick.

After Professor Shades dismissed class, Raiden and Wells both disappeared before I could approach them.

A frown settled on my expression. Why were they dodging me? Their heart-o-meters were still in good standing. So why had they avoided me?

I was far too used to being ignored, and a familiar stab of pain spread through my chest.

"Ready?" Colt asked, running a hand through his pretty blond locks.

I nodded, gathering my things and getting to my feet. "Yes. Last class of the day."

A wave of relief flooded through me. I couldn't wait to be done with the education. Magic or not, it was still class, and that in itself was exhausting.

"Professor Rowe's supposedly new," Tate said as we walked to Water Basics.

"Yeah," Colt said. "There's been a lot of talk about him with the rest of the instructors. Mom's mentioned him."

"Good or bad?" I glanced back and noticed Caryn walking behind us, glaring daggers at me. Rolling my eyes, I turned to Colt.

"Good. He's young. Twenty-eight." He shrugged. "But he apparently knows his stuff."

"Oh. So he's younger than me, then," I murmured thoughtfully.

"How old are you?" Tate interjected, eyes widened.

"Um, twenty-nine." I furrowed my brows.

My age was surely the same, right? But now that I thought about it, twenty-nine wasn't exactly academy age.

Man, this dream was so complex.

Colt chuckled. "Yeah, *right*. I've already checked your file. Thanks to Mom's access at the academy." He coughed, realizing he'd said too much and glancing away. "I mean, not in a creepy way. Anyway, you're twenty-one. Nice joke, though, pretty girl."

Oh, cool. My age changed here. I guess it was better to be younger than older.

And did he just call me pretty girl?

Tate visibly deflated as he heaved a sigh. "I was about to say, I've never been into cougars before, but..."

"Twenty-nine is *not* cougar age!" I gasped in horror. "How old are you guys?"

"Twenty-one," Colt answered.

"Twenty-one." Tate winked.

We entered the classroom and sat in the front row like we had the rest of the classes. Raiden and Wells strode in after a few other students, both meeting my gaze before sitting away from me.

Seriously, I didn't understand that.

"Welcome to Water Basics," a familiar melodic voice reached my ears as Cyrus, the same love interest I'd made fall off of a ladder and on top of me, strode into the room. "I'm Professor Rowe."

His blue eyes scanned the class, and recognition flashed in them as his gaze lingered on me for a few seconds.

My spine straightened, and my heart leapt into my throat.

He was so dang handsome, but he was also my *professor*. How was that for a forbidden love trope?

Or was it forbidden since we were consenting adults?

Freaking Leaf *knew* he was my professor. That was why he got so weird after she told him I was there for textbooks. It was also what prompted his pretty words to me about star-crossed lovers.

Cyrus cleared his throat, forcing his gaze off me. “The point of water magic is to go with the flow and relax. Stay calm and focused. There will be a time when certain water magic needs the opposite, but most water spells call for inner peace. But you will always need to let your magic flow however the nature of a spell goes.”

I kept my gaze on him as he spoke, enchanted with every mannerism he displayed as he taught.

Cyrus might’ve been my professor, but he was also my love interest. I wasn’t going to let him go.

Colt slid me a note with ink scrawled on it.

Do you know him?

I bit down on my lip and nodded before writing back.

I knocked him off a ladder in the library. Didn't know he was a professor.

Colt huffed a laugh, covering it with a fake cough as he wrote back.

Smooth.

Scowling, I crumbled the paper up and tossed it at him.

He mocked a wounded look and grabbed his chest dramatically.

“Take a deep breath,” Cyrus said, pulling me out of my moment with Colt.

I bit my tongue and listened to Cyrus, focusing back on him as I expanded my lungs and pulled in as much oxygen as I could.

“And exhale,” he instructed, exhaling air himself. “Then state, *locate water*.”

Expelling a breath, I said the spell, “Locate water.”

Magic tugged at my chest before a blue glow emitted from a cup on Cyrus’s desk and as the rest of the class said the spell, the glow burned brighter.

Cyrus smiled, and his gaze found mine once again. “Good job, everyone.”

I bit down on my lip to contain the prideful smile that tried to make an appearance. He’d only said that because he was the instructor and the class did the spell correctly. It wasn’t for me.

But I wanted it to be.

Cyrus jumped into the history of water magic and how it pertained to modern day, and it was actually interesting. Water was everywhere. We didn’t have to do much searching, and there were so many uses for it.

If it had been anyone else, I probably wouldn’t have been as interested. But when Cyrus spoke about water magic, his eyes lit up, and the way he spoke held me captivated.

It was the least boring lecture I’d ever been to, and it was all because of the professor.

“Remember to stay relaxed above all else with water magic, or you won’t be able to access it.” Cyrus clasped his hands together in front of him. “Have a great rest of your day. I’ll see you all Wednesday.”

Everyone started to pack up, and just like last class, both Raiden and Wells left the room before I could even gather my belongings.

Tate was tense, staring at the back of the room. His jaw ticked, and his hand fisted at his side. “Shit,” he growled.

Colt furrowed his brows before glancing back, and he glared. “Great.”

“What’s wrong?” I glanced back to see that they were staring at Caryn and some guy I hadn’t met yet. He had red

hair and dull brown eyes. He was also pretty short. Caryn was even taller than him.

They looked to be in an intense discussion.

“Kevin,” Tate spat.

He looked like a Kevin.

“If he’s talking to Caryn, it can’t be a good thing,” Colt stated.

“Why is that bad?” I asked.

At that moment, Caryn and Kevin turned their gazes on me. Caryn had a smug smile on her face, and Kevin smirked.

I lifted my hand and wiggled my fingers as I waved to them with a smile of my own.

Kevin’s smirk grew, and he waved back.

Caryn smacked his arm, glaring at him and saying something I couldn’t decipher before tugging him out of the classroom with her.

An immature giggle broke from my lips, but I covered my mouth with the hand that I had waved to them with.

“See how she just waves at them? Primrose is literally perfect,” Tate murmured, still clenching his fists together. “I swear I’m going to hurt Kevin if he tries anything.”

“I’ll help,” Colt stated dryly before meeting my gaze. “But she is perfect. Want to go on a little lunch date?”

I opened my mouth to reply when a memory smacked me in the face.

I’d always been fond of reverse harem games and anime. It was my favorite genre ever. Finding out romance novels existed with the genre was probably the most exciting news I’d ever heard.

It brought me great joy, and maybe that was silly, but it made me happy. My sister thought it was weird. She judged my interests harshly, and she even told our parents about it.

She made it seem so depraved that my parents refused to talk to me for days.

She told me, “*Primrose, you need to leave that fantasy behind. You can’t even keep one guy interested in you.*”

Well, suck it, sister.

I had six love interests, and they were interested in me.

I smiled at Colt. “I’d love-”

“Primrose,” Cyrus interrupted me, standing in front of us. “Would you mind if I had a word?”

I closed my mouth and glanced at Colt and Tate.

“Go ahead.” Colt flashed me a smile. “Text me. We can try to get together soon.”

“Same.” Tate grinned, elbowing Colt in the side. “See you later.”

“Bye,” I mumbled as they left the classroom, leaving me alone with Cyrus—AKA Professor Rowe.

I pushed my hair behind my ear. “What did you want to talk about?”

HEART EVENT TRIGGERED flashed in red letters above the one full heart of the heart-o-meter above his head as he smiled softly.

“How are you adjusting at the academy?”

“I’m good.” I shrugged. “Magic is super fun, but the mean girls suck.”

“Mean girls?” He tilted his head. “That’s unfortunate to hear.”

Noodles, his hair looked so silky smooth.

I clutched my hand into a fist in an attempt to stop myself from reaching out and running my fingers through it. “I actually was hoping I’d run into you again. I didn’t know it’d be as my professor, but...” I shrugged. “I wanted to apologize for knocking you off the ladder and making you fall on top of

me. I'd rather you be on top of me of your own accord, I mean."

My eyes widened as I slowly comprehended what just came out of my mouth unfiltered.

His second heart filled slightly as he chuckled. "It's quite alright."

"Why did you decide to be a professor?" I asked.

"I've always loved water, air, and ice magic. Teaching seems enjoyable, but it's not my first love." His expression turned to longing before he cleared his throat. "My first love is more in poetry."

"I love poetry," I murmured. "Words can be magical. It makes me all warm and fuzzy inside if I read a really beautiful poem."

"I couldn't agree more." He smiled.

"When it comes to magic, water magic is my favorite, I think." I tapped my finger against my lips. "I don't really know, though. Today was my first time using magic."

"What?" Cyrus asked incredulously. "How could today be your first time using it? Our entire world uses magic."

Noodles. I almost just outed myself. This wasn't real life. Of course it would be a magical world.

"Does me being your student change how you felt about me initially?" I asked the question that seemed to be lingering between us as a copout.

Realization flickered in his gaze, and he stepped back. "I pride myself on professionalism, Primrose. However, you are truly stunning. It's incredibly difficult to maintain professionalism." His hand reached out, and his fingertips were only an inch from my cheek as he moved them down as if he were touching me. "So difficult not to touch." He dropped his hand. "It's not wrong for me to be interested in you as we are both adults, but it's frowned upon since I am teaching you."

“How frowned upon is it, Cyrus?” My heart clogged my throat as I waited for his answer.

His heart-o-meter filled the second heart completely, and his gaze flicked from my mouth to my eyes. “Professor Rowe,” he corrected. “It’s frowned upon as you are in Basics, and I have just met you.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of love at first sight?” I joked weakly.

“A fantasy,” he murmured, eyes clouding over with hesitation. “Thank you for talking with me, Primrose. I look forward to watching you grow in magic.”

I knew a dismissal when I heard one, and I could take a hint.

“I’m living a fantasy,” I muttered to myself, turning and walking out of the classroom.

As much of a heartthrob as Cyrus was, I knew the professor trope. He was going to push me away before finally coming into his feelings for me. But for him to develop real feelings for me, I had to be able to interact with him.

As I mulled over ways I could get time with Cyrus, I bumped into a hard body carrying a stack of books. The books toppled to the ground from my impact.

The corner of one landed on my foot, and I yelped. “Ouch!”

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” Al mused, chuckling under his breath. HEART EVENT TRIGGERED flashed above his head. “It’s nice to see you again, Prim. You never did text me.”

“I’ve been meaning to,” I admitted in earnest, bending down and helping him gather up his books. “Sorry for the delay. I swear I’m going to. I planned to tonight.”

“So you’re not uninterested, then?” Vulnerability shone in his golden brown eyes as he stood up, accepting some books I’d gathered for him.

“In you?” My gaze widened. “Of course I’m interested. Have you seen you?”

He chuckled again, adjusting the tower of books in his arms. “I’m pleased you think so. We should try to schedule a date soon, don’t you think?”

“I absolutely think.” I nodded in agreement. “Would you like some help with those? We could start now?”

“As much as I’d love to start a date with you, I have to be in a meeting. I’m just a few doors down, otherwise I’d accept.” He smiled ruefully. “Sorry, Prim, but how was your first day at the academy?”

“Oh, great,” I replied with a grin. “It’s better now that I’ve run into you.”

“I can say the same.” He grinned before his phone started to ring, and he groaned. “Rain check?”

“Definitely.”

“Text me?” he asked hopefully.

“Of course,” I promised, tapping my bag where I kept the phone.

He smiled widely, and the heart-o-meter filled the third heart completely as he turned and walked away.

My heart filled with giddiness, anticipation, and apprehension. Six men were a lot, but I liked them. I just hoped that they would like me enough to share.

Dating simulation games were fun. They had the option to put your name in as the heroine, but you weren’t actually the heroine. Even the customizable games had limitations. But I woke up in this game, and I was myself. Regular Primrose.

Was I even worthy of being the protagonist?

My sister’s voice echoed in my head with all my shortcomings, and for a second, I let myself believe them like I always had. But then I remembered I was worthy, and I would prove that.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

I jolted up in a cold sweat with a sinking feeling of despair clawing at my throat.

I couldn't remember what I had been dreaming about, but whatever it was made me feel awful.

My brain felt fuzzy as I tried to recall what it was about, so I shook my head and tossed the comforter off me as I got up.

"Sleep good?" Leaf asked, lying on her moss bed and growing a pretty flower in the palm of her hand.

"Like crap," I croaked, making my way to the mini-fridge against the wall next to the desk, and grabbed a bottle of water to rid myself of my scratchy morning throat. It was cold going down, and I screwed the cap back on before depositing it on the desk and getting dressed.

"Dreams of your old life?"

"Old life?" I furrowed my brows, hating the fuzziness of my memories from before I'd woken up here.

I'd fallen asleep playing my game, but I couldn't remember what I had done before that anymore.

It was only day three, but my *real* life seemed like it was forever ago. This wasn't like any dream I'd ever had before.

"You aren't still thinking this is a dream, are you?" Leaf snapped, getting to her feet and planting her hands on her hips.

Planting. Get it? Cause, uh, she's a plant. Ugh. Nevermind.

I didn't respond as I sat back on my bed.

"I think we need to have a talk," she muttered. "I didn't want to put too much on you at once, but I think it's necessary."

"About what? This is literally the setting in my favorite dating simulation, and there are heart-o-meters and MANA and EXP in this place. That's the basics of a game, Leaf. I didn't teleport magically into my game. So what other explanation could you have?"

"You died," she said casually, not missing a beat. "And you were reincarnated here. As for the gaming aspects you're talking about, it's a visual representation of our stats thanks to magic."

Was she serious?

I burst into a fit of giggles, falling back on the bed and rolling with hysteria. Hot tears pricked at my eyes, and I couldn't stop laughing.

When I finally managed to calm down, I sat back up and wiped the tears from my eyes. "Okay, good one, Leaf."

"I'm not joking." Her expression remained neutral.

"Leaf, that's not funny." I shifted my butt on my bed. "I'm not dead."

"It's not funny," she agreed with a soft sigh before sitting next to me. "But it is what happened. You were reincarnated here to live a life you truly wanted. The gods felt like you lived your life for everyone but yourself back where you were from. So they sent you here."

"But I don't have any memory from this world beyond waking up here." I scowled.

"It doesn't happen often, but the gods can create someone in a world at whatever age they choose. Especially in a magical world."

"The gods wanted me to have my own harem of men?" I raised a brow. "Why would they even want that?"

“Because *you* want it,” she explained. “I’m here to guide and watch over you, Primrose. You deserve love.”

“But...how?” I croaked, a lump forming thick in my throat.

“Your brain broke,” she explained. “I believe your world calls it an aneurysm.”

“Oh, *shit*.” My gaze widened, and shock struck down my spine.

An aneurysm...

“What?” Leaf snorted. “Not saying noodles?”

“This isn’t the time for noodles!” I yelled, my voice taking on a high pitch of hysteria. My heart battered against my chest, and I shoved my fingers through my hair. Darkness crept into my vision as panic buzzed through my veins. “Are you telling me this is all real?”

“I’ve been telling you that from the start,” she quipped.

“But why do I remember my old life?”

“Those memories will fade.” She glanced up, and a softness entered her eyes that I hadn’t seen before. “But, Primrose, this world...it’s a gift from the gods themselves. You’ve been chosen, and while this world may seem like it has aspects of video games in your old world, it’s not. Your world must’ve caught glimpses of this world and used it to create video games because these aspects have always existed here.”

“Why me?” I croaked. “Why did they choose me for this?”

“Well don’t get all chosen one on me. You’re not *that* special. The gods reincarnate a lot. How they do it is up to them, and your reincarnation just happens to be a little unorthodox.”

“Is alcohol a thing here?” I shoved my palms into my eyelids and rubbed. A throbbing headache was blooming behind my eyes. “Because I need to get drunk to process.”

“Primrose...” Leaf warned before getting up. “Why don’t you go for a latte? Wells usually sketches in the mornings at

the cafe when there are no classes.”

“Sure,” I mumbled.

My head was reeling with a deep-seated emotional pain.

Obviously I knew this...*experience*...was different than anything I could've imagined. But I never thought I had died.

The dull throb in my brain turned sharp as I tried to focus and remember more of my life before waking up here. I knew I had a family, but at the same time, it didn't feel like I had left anyone important behind.

No one that needed me or wanted me around.

I wasn't even sure I had friends.

There was an odd sense of peace vibrating through my being at leaving my old world.

My thoughts consumed me, and I didn't realize I'd already left the dorm and trekked to the Academy Center.

The entire walk here was a blur.

I stood in line at the large counter stacked with chrome espresso and frothing machines. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee did little to ease my sadness.

I ordered a vanilla latte before noticing Wells sketching by a giant glass window. He sat at a bistro table with wrought iron chairs and padded seats, and his leg bounced underneath the table.

He looked deep in thought. His brows drew together as his pencil glided over the page, and his bottom lip snagged on his top tooth in concentration. I loved the way his eyes lit up as he focused, and I was dying to know what he was sketching.

The latte warmed my palms as I held it and walked over toward him. “Hi,” I murmured.

His eyes widened. “Primrose!”

“This seat taken?”

“No.” He snapped his sketch pad shut before jolting to his feet, stuffing the sketch pad into his bag and throwing it over

his shoulder.

My heart sank. “Because you’re leaving?”

“Sorry. Busy.”

With that, he speed-walked out of the cafe.

A familiar burning sensation filled my throat, and my hands tightened around the warm cup.

Maybe he *was* really busy. I mean, he had something to do. Or maybe I did something wrong.

I had been treating everyone like game characters.

Guilt swirled in my gut.

Pivoting on my heels, I turned and left the Academy Center.

A cool breeze blew through, skimming over me, and I sighed.

Everything felt real.

Everything was tangible. My surroundings, the weather, my *feelings*.

My memories of my past life were fading quickly, but I could remember that I was deeply unhappy.

That was enough of a reason for me to move on with the life I was given. So what was the lead pit in my stomach doing there?

Walking by the fountain, I was mesmerized by the water sparkling within. My eyes snagged on a familiar figure standing on the pathway to Water Hall.

My breath hitched.

It was Raiden, and he stood with a camera to his handsome face as he snapped photos of...geese.

Geese that were playing and manipulating the water waves leading to the building.

I loathed all birds, but geese were a special kind of terrorizer. I couldn’t imagine how terrifying *magic* geese could

be.

Yet, I walked toward him—even as he snapped photos of the geese.

Something deep inside me pulled me toward him, and I desperately needed someone.

I didn't want to be alone with my thoughts anymore. Not when I had just found out that I had died in my past life. I'd truly thought Leaf had been spitting nonsense or that I was dreaming and my subconscious had wished for this. But I never imagined it was true.

HEART EVENT TRIGGERED flashed above his head as he turned toward me and snapped a few photos of me before slowly lowering the camera down.

“Hi, little rose,” he murmured softly. “You photograph beautifully.”

“Hi,” I squeaked. “Thank you.”

Raiden was panty-dropping attractive. His black hair was slicked back and wet from the spray of the water. The droplets clung to the dark strands, making the purple tint more obvious under the sunlight. Just the sight of him made my heart beat faster.

A horrifying squawk stole my attention from my love interest, and I whipped my head toward the one goose with its eyes locked on me as if I were its target.

My gaze widened.

The goose wiggled its tail feathers.

Then it launched itself at me, wings flapping to give it momentum. Its eyes bore the creed of death.

“I'm not ready to die again,” I croaked mournfully.

“What was that?” Raiden asked, scratching his cheek.

The goose attacked.

Squealing, I reared my arm back and chucked my latte at the bird. Precious liquid splashed everywhere, but it didn't

deter it.

If anything, it just made it madder.

It sounded like a honking alarm, and it was *so* loud. Onlookers stared in the horror I was feeling.

“*Raiden!*” My feet scrambled as I rushed behind him, hands clutching the back of his shirt, just in time for a flaming circle to appear around us.

A deep chuckle rumbled from his chest.

The goose stopped its attempted assault and made a noise that I dubbed a grumble for a bird before it took to the sky, flying away from us.

My legs wobbled, and my limbs turned to jelly.

He let his camera fall against his chest as he faced me. His arms shot out to steady me by my shoulders.

His touch was everything.

“Thank you,” I breathed.

His soft-looking lips tugged into a genuine smile. “Wasn’t expecting you to be afraid of geese.”

I scowled, crossing my arms.

He cleared his throat, letting go of my shoulders to hold his hands up in surrender. “What’re your plans today?”

“I’m going to get another latte...maybe with you?” I fluttered my eyelashes at him, my heart beating erratically in my chest.

His third heart on the heart-o-meter filled as his gaze softened. “I’d love that.”

My chest swelled with acceptance. Raiden made me feel *wanted*, and that was exactly what I needed.

I held onto Raiden’s arm as we passed by the geese and headed back the way I had come. It was a silent but comforting walk toward the Academy Center.

A few minutes later, we were sitting on a comfy sofa in the café side-by-side with our caffeinated drinks in hand.

“What’re you doing after the academy?” he asked.

I glanced down at my cup, happy to finally be able to drink it. “I don’t really know.” I needed to learn more about this world now that I knew I would be here for good. “What’re your plans? I’m not even sure what I could do really.”

“I’ll probably try to get an internship with a magazine company or a document-series. I want to learn dark magic so I can manipulate the dark and photograph or video animals in their natural habitats at night.”

“That’s really cool,” I murmured. “I bet you could go to so many different places for that.”

He shrugged. “Is there anything you’re interested in doing?”

“What is there?” I sipped on my milky vanilla latte, taking a moment to appreciate the warmth cascading down my throat. “I just got here. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I don’t even know what I *can* do.”

“Well, what were you interested in as a kid?”

Biting down on my lip, I hesitated. I hesitated because I didn’t remember. I genuinely had no idea what I wanted to do.

Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them away fast.

“I don’t know,” I croaked out.

He leaned in, and his black raspberry scent filled my space. “What’s wrong, little rose?”

“Everything before I woke up at this academy is a blur. All of my memories,” I admitted, staring at the concern in his eyes. “Never mind. It’s nothing.”

“That doesn’t sound like nothing.” His warm breath fanned over my face. “Talk to me.”

“I don’t think I can yet.” I frowned as despair clutched ahold of my heart. “But I will, when I’m ready.”

“I’ll be here when you are,” he promised, sitting up straight and grabbing his camera before showing me a photo

of the geese manipulating a wave. “I bet this will take your mind off things.”

He switched to a photo of me...running from the goose and toward him with an expression of pure fear carved into my face. The goose was pictured behind me, mouth open and certain death in its eyes as it chased after me.

“I knew it wanted me dead,” I accused, pointing at the goose on the screen.

He huffed a laugh. “It probably sensed your fear.”

I cracked a smile and a chuckle bubbled out of me. “It probably did.”

He lifted his camera, snapped another photo, and glanced at it. “Your smile is much better than the scream of fear.”

My shoulders shook as I giggled, and I waved my hand back and forth. “Thank you, Raiden. You really cheered me up today.”

“Why did you need cheering up?” He put his camera in a case before taking a drink of his espresso.

Before I could answer, his phone rang.

The moment he looked at the caller, his face paled. “I’m sorry, little rose.” With a shaky hand, he set his espresso on the small table in front of us. “Do you mind if we meet up a bit later? It’s my father.”

“Of course.” I nodded, a newfound worry in my chest as I noticed the sudden shift in his demeanor. “That’s fine. I’ll see you later.”

He stood up with a jolt before walking away and answering the phone as he went.

I glanced at his abandoned cup with a sigh. I wondered why he’d been so upset over his father calling. What was their relationship like?

At least he had a family, though, unlike me. My family was in another world entirely.

That truth burrowed itself in my gut, and I hated it.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

RAIDEN

“Yes sir?” I answered the phone, my chest aching as I walked away from the woman I’d become fond of so quickly.

She had five hearts of her heart-o-meter filled above her head, and they’d been filled from the moment I saw her. It was clear to me it meant that she was my soulmate.

But I’d also overheard Colt and Tate, the two she’d befriended and sat by in class, stating the same thing about her. Her heart-o-meter had been maxed out for them as well.

It was rare for heart-o-meters to be fully filled, but to have this occurrence with more than one person?

Impossible.

“Charity Gala. The third Saturday of next month. Eight PM at our estate.” His voice came out stern, angry, like the crack of a whip with every syllable. “Bring a date.”

“Yes sir,” I accepted his request like a good son as I opened the door and left the Academy Center, heading toward the dormitory.

“Make sure the woman you bring is presentable. Do not embarrass me any more than you already have.”

Click.

He hung up.

Of course he fucking did.

The old man never spoke to me more than to keep up appearances. He'd loathed me from the moment I was born, but when Mother left, he blamed me. Like a baby could do anything about its mother's whims.

It was his own fault for sleeping with a woman who wasn't his match. He told me her heart-o-meter with him was only half full on the first heart. His heart-o-meter had apparently been two hearts for her to see—or so she said.

My mother apparently didn't want a kid, so she gave me my father's last name and dumped me with him. Since he didn't have an heir and didn't plan on being with another woman, he kept me.

If tossing me at his maid was considered keeping me.

The maid was the one to raise me.

She wasn't terrible, but I wasn't her kid. She had kids of her own. I was a job to her, and I was treated as such.

It didn't hurt as badly once I hit middle school.

When I finally graduated high school, I was forced to take a gap year to learn about running his business and becoming his heir.

I hated everything about it, and when I finally had enough, I told him.

I didn't want to run a corporate business. I wanted to take photos.

He was furious, and I was punished and sent off to the most respectable academy in our country to aid in the one thing I did want to do. He couldn't afford to lose his heir, after all.

His thoughts were that once I attempted to follow my dream, I'd realize it wasn't sustainable and I'd come back to his company.

Never going to happen.

Due to my father's status in politics, he had to keep in contact with me a little and make sure I kept his family name

‘respectable’.

There had been so many instances where I wanted to sully it, but I remembered what happened when I did that.

The scar down my spine throbbed in hot white pain as a reminder of what happened when I disobeyed my father in public.

I sent a quick text to Primrose.

RAIDEN

Be my date for a Charity Gala next month?

She responded almost instantly.

PRIMROSE

I'll be your date any time. 😊

My heart stuttered in my chest as I stuffed my phone into my pocket and trudged through the doors of the dormitory and entered the Ice Tower.

I'd been pissed I wasn't in Dark Tower when I was first assigned my dorm, but now that I knew Primrose lived in the same one, I was content. She was beautiful, but she was also smart and kind.

I didn't know how I lucked out with her heart-o-meter, but I couldn't wait to find out more about her.

I climbed the stairs and went to my dorm. My room number was 322, but Primrose stayed in room 222.

We were a floor apart, but we were in the same tower.

That was enough.

Entering my room, the door slammed shut behind me. It was dark, and my decor was all types of black. Black bedding, black journals, black curtains. But my favorite type of decor was new.

Physical pictures of Primrose were taped to my wall.

She never knew I was watching her from the first moment I saw her when Alderidge was giving her a tour on her first day. I didn't care if it wasn't right.

Her green eyes were bright, filled with possibility and excitement, and her pink lips were full and glossy. She had the prettiest smile I'd ever seen with dimples that complimented her rosy cheeks.

And *gods*, her hair. It was the most calming shade of blonde. I desperately craved to run my fingers through the golden waves.

My little rose was stunning, she made my heart hurt but feel so light as well. It was hard to explain, but looking at her was enough to calm my inner demons.

So when I saw her, I lifted my camera and snapped photos as I followed her around that day.

It was weird, I admit it fully. But I couldn't stop.

She had already been with Alderidge when I saw her, and I could tell he was interested in her too. His eyes never left her, and when they did, they immediately found themselves back on her.

Leaf was with her, too, and Leaf was a well-known match-maker in not only the academy but our entire country. She never failed in making a match for her charge, and Primrose was clearly her charge.

Then she met Wells, Tate, Professor Rowe, and Colt.

Her eyes twinkled with more excitement each time, filled with adoration. I couldn't stand her not looking at me the same way.

But she did.

I'd bumped into her on purpose after she got her latte because I couldn't stand not knowing if she'd like me the way I did her.

And she did. The look in her gaze when she noticed me lit my soul on fire. It was the moment that the scalding latte splashed onto my shirt that changed my future.

My upbringing might have been shit, but my future wouldn't be.

Not with Primrose in it.

PRIMROSE

“Oh, my *noodles!*” I squealed at the fluffy gray bunny hopping along the grass in front of the dormitory and carefully walked toward it.

The bunny twitched its nose at me before hopping toward me.

I took that as permission to approach. Unlike the demon geese, bunnies were so sweet and adorable.

This one was no exception.

“You are the cutest little thing ever!” I dropped to my knees, the grass blades poking my legs. Reaching out, I scooped the little one up and nuzzled its super soft fur.

My fingers brushed against something under its neck. “Oh. What’s this?” I touched a collar and trailed my fingers over it until I found a tag on it. The tag read ‘*Cotton*’. “Your name’s Cotton, then,” I cooed, flipping the tag over to read:

*Please return to Ice Tower room
224.*

“And you already have a home, sweet bun. Why don’t we take you back there?”

His little nose twitched, and I assumed he liked that idea a lot.

I giggled, continuing to pet him as we went inside Ice Tower and toward a dorm room near mine. “If you want to go

home so bad, maybe you shouldn't run away."

He kicked his back feet at me, the backs of his feet scratching my skin through my clothes.

I readjusted my hold on him to avoid dropping him. "Oh, don't be mad," I told him in a sweet voice, and he finally stopped.

He was smart.

When I made it to room 224, my eyes widened in realization. It was the room next to mine, and it was Colt and Tate's room.

"You would live here," I mumbled as my heart fluttered.

It felt different somehow now that I knew this wasn't a game but my new life. My *reincarnated* life. This was all real. Colt and Tate were as real as I was.

I lifted my fist and knocked once, feeling the hard wood under my knuckles in a way I hadn't before.

The door jerked open, revealing a frantic Colt with a HEART EVENT TRIGGERED flashing above it. His blond hair was a disheveled mess, and his green eyes were wide with shock as he stared at Cotton comfortably asleep in my arms.

"Primrose! Oh, thank gods you found him!" The relief was as clear in his voice as it was in his expression.

"He was outside," I told him as he opened the door wider and invited me in. I walked into the room behind him, and he softly shut the door behind us. "He just fell asleep on the way up the stairs."

"I can't believe he let you grab him," he murmured, taking him from me and carefully placing him on a bunny bed without waking him. "He's usually a lot more aggressive. He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Colt had an entire set up for Cotton, and it was complete with his own fluffy bed on a wooden platform and a fancy play area with a fake grass-type flooring. I'd never seen such a spoiled bunny.

“No! This sweet thing?” I scoffed. “He probably doesn’t have an aggressive bone in his body.”

Colt snorted before dissolving into laughter. “He goes out of his way to bite Tate, and he refuses to interact with anyone but me and my mom. The fact that he let you even get within a few feet of him is a miracle.”

“Cotton and I are fast friends, obviously.” I fluffed my hair jokingly.

“Obviously.” Colt faced me, and his gaze softened the longer he stared. “Cotton Tail Zinman the Third has great taste.”

I huffed out a laugh. “His name is *not* Cotton Tail Zinman the Third!”

“Yes, it is.” He blinked, dead serious as he stroked the bunny’s fur. “Don’t ask about the first or second. It’s not good.”

“I’m sure.” I pressed my lips together and nodded. “So, where’s Tate?”

His brows bumped together in a frown. “Practice.”

He moved over to what I assumed was his bed and sat down, and I took a moment to look at his room.

Unlike mine, there were wooden floors and two twin beds on opposite sides of the room. Colt’s side was cleaner, and his bedspread was a comfy beige and matched the wooden decor of the room.

Tate’s side was a bit more messy with a comforter that matched the academy’s colors of magenta and black.

Both sides had a wooden desk. Colt’s side had textbooks neatly stacked while Tate’s side they were thrown about haphazardly.

Colt’s side also housed Cotton’s home.

“You can come sit with me,” he mumbled awkwardly, reaching up and scratching his head.

I watched the way his bicep flexed underneath his shirt sleeve and swallowed hard.

It might not have been a game, but I still desired all of the men I had set out to win over. Was that wrong of me?

I nodded and went to sit beside him. The bed dipped as I locked my fingers together in my lap. “Thanks for inviting me inside.”

He let out a harsh breath. “As if I would ever not invite you.”

“I didn’t know this academy allowed animals.” I twisted my fingers together. “That’s kind of awesome.”

“Yeah.” He grinned. “Cotton’s my emotional support rabbit.”

“Really?” I lifted my head and turned toward him.

“Yeah.” His lips curled into a smile. “I’ve always had a rabbit. I grew up with one constantly. Hence, the Third.” He coughed, glancing at Cotton before returning his gaze to me. “Do you have a pet?”

I shook my head, pretty sure the answer was no, but there was a fuzzy film over my past. “I don’t think so.”

“Do you play games?”

“Of course not!” I answered quickly, my hand flying to my chest. My heartbeat was erratic against my palm. “Why would you ask that?”

“Um.” He pointed to a handheld gaming device on his bed that I’d completely missed when I looked at their room. “I just wanted to see if you’d like video games.”

“Oh.” I ran both hands through my hair and took a deep breath. “Sorry. I do like video games, actually. I thought you were talking about something else.”

I’d thought he meant games with *him*.

I’d set out on a journey to win this game that was actually my new life. I had been treating them as a game, but they

weren't characters in a game. They were real people with real souls. Souls that I'd found I connected to.

"We'll have to play sometime." He grabbed the device and turned it on before showing me a few of the games he played.

"We'll definitely play together. I love all of those games!" Excitement rushed through my veins as I smiled up at him. "I'll just have to buy a gaming device."

"I have an extra." He shot up off the bed and rummaged through a box under his bed. "I bought it for Tate as a present, but he refused it since he doesn't like games. I knew that, but it was worth a shot. I never have anyone to play with." He pulled out the device still in a box with a pout. "But if you like gaming, we should be able to play together."

My lips parted in shock as he sat back down and plopped the box into my lap. I ran my fingers across the image of the console. "Is it really okay for me to take this?"

"Of course it is." He waved me off. "As long as you promise you'll play with me."

"I'll play with you," I told him, tears pricking my eyes. "Nobody's ever given me anything like this before. Thank you."

He reached over and softly ran a hand down my spine before pulling away. "You're more than welcome."

Several different feelings surged through me. Colt was special. They all were.

He cleared his throat. "I need to ask you something, but I don't want you to be offended."

I glanced over, my hands clutching the box so it didn't fall out of my lap. "What is it?"

"I'm gonna lay it all out in the open, okay?" He exhaled a shaky breath that ramped up my own nerves. "I'm into you. Like really into you, but so is Tate. Tate and I have been friends forever. I need to know which one of us you like. Don't feel like you'll hurt my feelings if you say it's Tate."

After setting the game system aside, I ran my sweaty palms over my legs and kept my gaze locked on his so he could see my sincerity with how I was about to answer this question.

“I...I need to be honest. I like *both* of you, but I also like others. It sounds awful, I know, but—”

“It doesn’t sound awful,” he cut me off. “Do you like *me*?”

“Yes,” I answered without hesitation. “But I also like—”

“Doesn’t matter.” He exhaled a long, steady breath. “As long as you like me, I’m in.”

My heart battered my chest, and I stared at him in open shock. “What?”

“This reverse harem thing you’re wanting...I’m all in. As long as you’ll have me.” He shrugged, and his heart-o-meter raised slightly. “I like you, pretty girl. More than I’ve liked anyone, ever really.”

“You’re really okay with me working on other relationships?” My brain felt like it had short-circuited.

“Yes.” A chuckle rumbled through him. “As long as *we* have a relationship, I’m happy.”

“Do you want a relationship?” I blinked a few times as I stared at him.

He wasn’t joking. He was 100% serious.

“Are you asking me out?” he drawled with a smirk plastered on his face.

“If you’re going to say yes, then yes.” I nodded, my entire being reeling in shock.

This man was already accepting his role in my harem. If this were a game, I’d be rejoicing. But was he really okay with sharing me?

“Yes.” He gave me a wicked smile as the second heart of his heart-o-meter filled completely. “If we’re now dating, can I kiss my girlfriend?”

“Dating?” I squeaked. “Kissing?”

“Yes.” His laughter vibrated the bed as he moved closer, cupping my face and leaning in. “I don’t care if we just met, pretty girl. I’m all in. Your heart-o-meter is full for me. There’s no question. If you’ll have me, I’m in.”

“You can see the heart-o—”

He cut me off with a tender, soul-shattering kiss. His lips melded against mine, and he pushed me back onto the bed before hovering above me. He threaded his fingers in my hair and tilted my head back as his tongue slipped in and tangled with mine.

The kiss was explorative, sweet, and everything I’d ever wanted from a kiss.

I couldn’t tell how long we lay there before the door opened, but Colt peeled off me slowly.

My breath caught as I looked over to see Tate frozen at the door.

“Shit.” Colt ran a hand through his hair and stood up. “Tate, it’s not what it looks like.”

Tate gave one sharp nod and kicked the door shut behind him before dropping his duffel bag with a thud. “So you weren’t on top of the woman I’m into, and you weren’t kissing her on your bed?”

“It’s exactly what it looks like,” I muttered guiltily, sitting up.

As soon as my gaze locked on Tate’s, I could see the surprise swirling in his pretty blue eyes.

What had I done?

Just because Colt was down to share me didn’t mean Tate or the rest of the guys would share the same sentiment.

I’d *hurt* him with my actions.

Then, they both started to chuckle, staring at each other with a clear challenge in their gaze.

“It’s fine, Primrose. Colt and I talked about you in *serious* detail.” Tate waved his hand back and forth before bursting into a run and tackling Colt back onto his bed.

I yelped, scrambling over as they wrestled until neither was a victor and they both tapped out.

Tate heaved a breath before tugging me down between the two of them like it was natural, and his heart-o-meter’s third heart which was slightly filled, increased the rest of the way.

I fell into the middle, and I couldn’t believe the way I felt *at home* between them. It wasn’t normal.

I held my breath until Tate took pity on me.

“We’ve shared women before,” he told me.

A hot streak of jealousy shot through me. “What?”

“Sexually,” Colt added. “We’ve never shared a woman in the same relationship like you’ve suggested.”

“Wait. Seriously?” I snapped my mouth shut. “Please tell me you didn’t share Caryn.”

Colt full-body shivered as disgust screwed up his face. “Ew. No. Hard pass.”

“Only women at parties,” Tate told me. “And never more than once. We’ve done it maybe four times.”

“It was four,” Colt agreed. “But with you...we could share you in a relationship. Be with you.”

“And only me?” I asked timidly, covering my face with my hands. “It sounds so bad. I’m totally holding you to a different standard here, but I don’t want you with any other girls but me. Yet, I like more than just you two. How could I expect you to be okay with that?”

“Because we are okay with it, pretty girl.” Colt grabbed one of my hands from my face.

Tate grabbed my other hand and tugged it down before lacing my fingers with his. “As long as you stay open in communication and let us know when and who you’re into, we’re good.”

“I would definitely do that.” I nodded before turning toward Colt. “You mentioned my heart-o-meter.”

“Yeah, about that.” Colt scratched the tip of his nose. “Your heart-o-meter is filled with all five hearts and has been since we met.”

“Same here,” Tate added with a flush of pink on his cheeks.

I didn’t even know I had a heart-o-meter, but that was a lack on my part. Leaf mentioned that this was all part of the magic in this world.

Of course I’d have one for my love interests.

“What does that mean?”

It was the weirdest feeling being with Colt and Tate. It felt so normal and calming. I wanted what they were offering more than anything, but somehow it felt like it was too good to be true.

“We’re not sure,” Tate admitted. “But what we do know is that we want to be with you.”

“In a relationship aspect and a sexual one,” Colt added before blushing. “I mean, I know the sexual aspect is not happening right now or any time soon.”

“Yeah, not that we don’t want it to because we totally do!” Tate groaned. “I mean...we’re totally into you, and we want to see how this works out.”

“Exactly that,” Colt agreed.

And that was how I ended up with two eager boyfriends with open minds for their shared girlfriend to take a harem.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

I tossed and turned all night, waking in a cold sweat before my alarm.

Stumbling to the dresser, I peeled off the sweaty t-shirt I'd fallen asleep in and yanked out the designated uniform of this academy. It consisted of a pink skirt and a white button-up shirt. This uniform was also from the game, a piece of my old life that seemed far away now.

The guys had maroon blazers and tops with a button-up white shirt as well.

I, for one, immensely enjoyed staring at them when they were dressed for classes.

I'd fallen into a sort of routine two weeks into my life in this world.

I woke up, got scolded by Leaf for something I'd done the day before, grabbed coffee, went to class on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday practiced magic, and then spent time with my *boyfriends*.

Colt and Tate had been my rocks. They were the only two that I'd been honest with about my desires for more than one lover so far. We hadn't shared our relationship specifics with anyone else yet. We didn't feel the need to. They were mine, and I was theirs.

Although, I still hadn't kissed Tate. Which was a dang *shame*. I still remembered the outline of his dick in his shorts that first day I met him. But timing kept being wrong.

The shock of my true fate in this world had put a bit of a damper on my main goal of forming a harem. Could you blame me?

But I still *did* want to pursue the other men.

“Bad night?” Leaf asked as I grabbed my bag and slung it over my shoulder. “You look like utter shit.”

Groaning, I threw my head back and shook my hair wildly behind me. “Good morning to you, too, Leaf.”

She waited as I ran my fingers through my hair and tossed my hands in the air as I realized I needed a brush.

I stomped over to my desk and grabbed my brush before running it through the unruly tangles that had formed in my hair. “Nightmare, I think. I keep dreaming of something that makes me feel *so freaking depressed*. But when I wake up, I can’t remember what I dreamt of.”

“Past life memories,” she informed me, growing a pretty flower on her head before floating over toward me. “Your soul is still grieving the regrets from there. You did die awfully young.”

“Don’t remind me.” I groaned again, tugging the brush through my tangles until they dispersed and I could run my fingers smoothly through my hair. “I don’t even remember any friends or family. I did have a family, right?”

“You did,” she confirmed with a nod. “But they were from before. You need to live in the present.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I stated sarcastically as I set the brush down. “Let me just tell that to my subconscious.”

She huffed a laugh before waving to my hair. “Much better. I can’t believe you were going to walk out of here like that. I thought you were supposed to form a harem?”

“Colt and Tate are already my boyfriends,” I pointed out, grabbing lip gloss and blotting it onto my lips before smacking my lips together. “I’m a work in progress.”

“You need to do better, *miss work in progress*.” She moved toward her bed and made herself comfortable. “You only have

this year to form it. Whoever you don't progress with will be left behind to find love with someone else."

Gnarly green jealousy spread through me, and I shot Leaf a nasty glare. "No, they won't!"

She just rolled her eyes. "I'm your guardian. If I don't tell you the un-sugar-coated truth, you'll screw up...*again*. Now, go on and get your caffeine to start the day."

"Yeah, yeah," I grumbled, waving to her before heading out of the room.

I would've made dang sure that they wouldn't fall for anyone but me. They didn't completely know it yet, but they were mine. Not just Colt and Tate, but the rest of them, too.

Not just in a "collect them all" type way like it was before I'd met them when I thought this was a game and I was dreaming.

No, I genuinely cared for them.

I glided my fingertips over Colt and Tate's door as I walked down the hall.

Colt slept in every day. He was a huge fan of sleep, so he would wait until the very last minute to get up and trudge to class. How he could wake up and still be happy without any caffeine was beyond me.

Tate was at practice just like every morning before class. MANA ball was intense, I'd come to find out, and the players took it just as seriously as the coach did. They were like one big happy family. It was sweet.

But with both of my boyfriends busy in the early morning, I was left to obtain my precious lattes all by myself.

Walking into the Academy Center, I beelined to the cafe and ordered a vanilla latte per usual.

What wasn't usual was the dark-haired artist sketching by the window.

I hadn't seen Wells there since I'd caught him sketching the last time, and I came here to say good morning.

Wells was great at avoiding me.

“Thank you.” I grabbed the latte from the girl and made my way toward my elusive love interest.

His hair fell into his eyes as his hand glided over the page. He was so attractive it should’ve been illegal.

He still had the heart-o-meter with the first heart completely filled, but above it flashed with the words HEART EVENT TRIGGERED.

My butterflies straight up exploded in my belly.

“Good morning,” I murmured as I slipped into the chair across from him. “Mind if I join you this time?”

I didn’t want to give him a chance to deny me sitting in with him. I desperately wanted to just get to know him.

His pretty blue eyes snapped to mine, and his lips twitched in what *looked* to be irritation. But I liked to think it was nervousness.

If it *were* the dating simulation I’d thought it was, he’d be the brooding artist that was reluctant in his feelings.

It was odd how I remembered the game from my old life more than I remembered my actual life.

I knew this wasn’t a game anymore, I really did, but most of what I knew about men came from games. And it’d gotten me two boyfriends, so it couldn’t have been the worst strategy.

Why change what was clearly working?

He forced his lips into a thin line. “Well, you are already there.”

“I am.” I nodded, lifting my cup to sip on the creamy warmth of my latte before wincing. The liquid was still scalding and burnt a few of my taste buds on the way down. I swallowed hard. “Hot,” I squeaked, sticking my poor tongue out for the air to hit the abused taste buds.

He snorted before smothering a laugh with his hand.

His second heart-o-meter filled.

I brought my cup down and rested the hot bottom on my thigh. “Your work is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Do you plan to make a career out of it?”

He dropped his hand, revealing a prominent smirk before he smoothed out his features with a shrug. “What’re your plans after academy?”

“I wish I knew.” I sighed ever so dramatically. I tried not to squeal in joy at the fact that he was talking to me. He was the love interest that avoided me the most. “But I like books.”

“Books and magic,” he hummed, going back to drawing. “Odd combination.”

“That’s true.” I brought the cup up and blew gently through the top part of it in hopes of cooling it off. “I wish I remembered exactly what I did before coming here.”

His brows furrowed. “We just started classes a couple of weeks ago.”

“Right.” My cheeks heated as I took a small sip. My tongue felt like sandpaper from where I’d burnt it, but thankfully, it was good to drink without scalding off any more tastebuds.

His arm stopped moving, and his lips quirked into a soft smile as he stared at the page. “See you later.”

He tossed his sketchpad in his bag and scurried away without so much as a look my way.

A fluttering of paper dropped from his bag onto his seat as he left.

My hope that was swirling in my chest sank.

His heart-o-meter was increasing, so why did he insist on avoiding any time around me?

Getting up, I went around the table, carefully picked up the dropped page, and looked down at the sketch.

My heart leapt to my throat.

The sketch was of *me*.

My eyes snapped up toward the exit, but Wells had already left. I studied the drawing again.

I had been sitting in class with my elbows on the desk, staring forward in a dreamy state. But I looked way better in his sketch than I did in real life...and I'd been staring at Cyrus while he was teaching.

My cheeks flamed with heat, and I tucked the sketch in my bag between the pages of my journal so I didn't wrinkle it.

Wells was the most talented artist I'd ever seen, and the way he could create people and landscapes was unreal. Granted, I'd only seen this sketch and the magical painting I accidentally saw on my first day. But those two illustrations were so realistic and beautifully captured.

The man's talent was immeasurable in my eyes—and he'd been drawing *me!*

Excitement fluttered in my belly, and I practically skip-jumped into Air Hall.

As I rounded the corner for class, someone fell into step with me.

I knew who it was from my peripheral vision, and I sighed as irritation rippled through me.

“Hey. Primrose, right?” The guy who had been glued to Caryn's side the past couple of weeks ran a hand through his red hair.

Colt and Tate had warned me away from him, and I knew they were right to be worried about his intentions. I wasn't an idiot. He and Caryn were plotting something against me. Leaf had even said Caryn was the antagonist here. Mean girls were the same in any world it seemed.

Still, it was ballsy for him to approach me at all.

“I'm Kevin,” he continued. “You're seeing Tate, right? Or trying to?”

I ignored him again, stretching my legs to take me to class faster.

“Woah, you’re fast,” he muttered under his breath as he kept up. “You should stay away from him, though. He’s really not all that great.”

We finally made it to class, and I whirled around on him. “Mind your own business, Kevin.”

“Tate’s with Caryn,” he said. “He’s basically unavailable. They break up and get back together a lot. You should just stay away. I’m really only trying to help you. You don’t wanna get your heart broken, do you?”

I opened my mouth to give him a piece of my mind when an arm slipped around my waist and tugged me into a toned chest. Snapping my mouth shut, I glanced up at Colt who had me flush against him.

“How about you stay away from our girlfriend?” Tate moved in front of me to separate me from Kevin. “I’m not going to break her heart.”

My mouth fell open again. I could feel eyes searing into me from two specific men. It was wild that I could tell who they were.

Looking at the back of the class, I noticed Raiden and Wells staring directly at me with indecipherable looks on their faces.

Guilt pooled in my chest, and I forced my gaze from them.

I hadn’t been able to talk to them about what I wanted. They probably thought I was playing them or something. I had to explain everything to them. Hopefully, I could after class.

“*Our* girlfriend?” Kevin sputtered, tilting his body to the side to stare at me. “You’re *both* dating her?”

“Do you have a problem with that?” Colt growled out the words through clenched teeth.

Kevin straightened and shook his head before scurrying over to Caryn, whose mouth was still open in shock.

Wells stood up with a jolt before walking out of the room without so much as looking at me again.

Raiden's gaze never left me.

My heart stuttered, and there was a falling, spinning-down feeling that made me feel like I would be sick.

The entire class had watched our exchange, but the reactions I cared about were Raiden's and Wells's.

I didn't want them hurt by this. I hadn't had a chance to explain yet.

Colt tugged me to our seats, and I broke eye contact with Raiden.

My boyfriends squashed me between the two of them as we sat down.

"Interesting," Professor Zinman hummed, staring at me.

Even Colt's freaking mom had seen that. Of course she'd been in here. She would never approve of me now.

My face flamed with even more heat than before, but Colt's hand found mine and squeezed.

"It's fine," he whispered. "Mom's cool."

"What about Wells?" I sucked in a deep breath, holding it in for a few moments before letting it out. "He *left the room.*"

"Is he joining our harem?" he whispered.

"He's pretty cool," Tate added.

I swallowed back the guilt and shrugged. "I want him to."

Colt frowned. "I'm sorry, pretty girl. Want me to track him down and explain on your behalf?"

"I appreciate the offer a lot," I mumbled, the tension in my chest easing slightly. "But I should probably do that myself."

"Let's talk about magic instead of gossiping, yeah?" Colt's mom clasped her hands together in front of her. "Speedy movement spell is this week's lesson. But since this is the first active air spell I'm teaching, I need *everyone's* focus."

Murmurs broke out around us, but I wasn't sure if it was talk about the new spell or about my relationships.

But I stopped caring as much while Professor Zinman droned on and on about the history of the spell. Evidently, speedy movement was used as a delivery method to deliver physical items. It could also be used as transportation.

She also recounted a few incidents in history where this spell was crucial in one way or another.

When class let out, Colt stayed back to talk to his mom while Tate and I rushed out to try and catch Raiden or find Wells before Earth Basics.

We were not successful.

My gut coiled in raw guilt and sadness for hurting them both. I didn't regret dating Colt and Tate, but I wanted to date them too.

Earth and Fire Basics went by quickly and boring, but both classes Raiden and Wells ignored every attempt of me getting their attention.

I was settled in between Colt and Tate, listening to Cyrus as he talked about the history of the condense water spell.

I couldn't focus much on what he was saying since my thoughts were plagued by Raiden and Wells and the fact I hadn't been able to talk to them about me dating Colt and Tate.

Then I just got irritated because Caryn kept answering questions for him, and she annoyingly got them right.

Class eventually ended. I went to leave the classroom to talk with Raiden and Wells even if I had to hunt them down, but Tate caught my arm as everyone else left.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Um, yeah. Of course.” I nibbled on my bottom lip. “What is it?”

Colt dropped a kiss to my head. “I'll see you later, pretty girl.”

“See you later,” I mumbled, watching him stride out of the room.

I could feel Cyrus's gaze on us as Tate pulled something out of his bag and handed it over to me.

"There's a game on Saturday. I'd love it if you came and wore my jersey since you're officially dating me and all." He grinned, and his dimples showed. Then his grin faltered for a moment. "And my best friend, but I mean, that still counts as you being mine. Right?"

I took the jersey from him and couldn't help but smile. "Yeah, I guess I can wear it to support my boyfriend," I teased.

He fist-pumped the air and picked me up in a bear hug before squeezing tightly. "Thanks, babe."

I had to clutch the slippery fabric of the jersey to avoid dropping it. "Were you nervous to ask?"

"Hell yes, I was," he practically shouted as he let me down. "I lucked out with you."

"Excuse me," Cyrus interrupted with a snap.

I glanced over at him, and my heart dropped once again.

"What's up, Professor Rowe?" Tate glanced over.

Cyrus's muscles along his jawline bunched as he stared at the jersey in my hand. "Could you please do this somewhere else?"

I hesitated.

Cyrus's gaze held a wounded stare, and it hurt my heart.

"Totally." Tate grabbed my hand and pulled me with him out of the classroom.

I couldn't help but notice the way the heart-o-meter flickered, but I knew it was teetering on losing a heart.

I needed to meet with the rest of my love interests and explain things. I liked Colt and Tate, but I liked them, too. I just needed the chance to be able to fully explain that to them.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

ALDERIDGE

The student council was responsible for organizing any events that needed to be held. That meant MANA ball games, dances, and graduation ceremonies were handled by the council by order of me.

Being the president of the student council meant I was held responsible for everything.

Some of the tasks would've been better suited for the *staff* in this academy, but the reward for managing the position well was vast.

Although this was only a one-year-long academy, students received an elite education for magic mastery that was renowned all over the world. A diploma from MANA Sim Academy set anyone up for life.

I'd worked my entire academic life toward getting enrolled here, and when I did, I worked even harder to become a member of the student council. I hadn't anticipated that I worked hard enough to become president, but here I was.

I also had to keep my grades up to the highest possible marks at all times to avoid losing my position.

An eerie shiver slid down my spine as I thought of what my family would've done if that happened. I'd be disowned.

Running a hand through my orange hair, I huffed a breath as I stared at my council.

There were eight students on the council at a time. I counted for one, and my vice president, Harold, was another.

The other six were different levels, but all had the same mindset as I did which meant they were just waiting for me to screw up so they could snatch up my president title.

“Come on,” April whined, pouting her lip out and batting her dull green eyes at me. “Starlight Star Bright is the best theme! It’s never been done before here.”

“We just did a Night Skies theme last year,” Harold pointed out with a frustrated groan. “It was just called something else.”

April was a term ahead of me in Advanced classes, and she hated that I earned the president position in my first term, especially since I’d taken the position from her.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure how she’d even remained on the student council. My guess was that she had connections.

Her pointed nose scrunched up as she shook her head, causing a piece of hair to fall into her face. “That’s not the same thing.”

“It is.” I sided with Harold. “Though, it could be financially freeing to reuse decorations.”

She gasped in horror. “We couldn’t!”

“I’m not spending more money for decor of something we already have.” I rubbed my temples to ease the pressure building in my skull.

It was a dance theme. Of all the things they wanted to argue over, it was the dance theme for this end of term.

“Any other ideas?” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “It’s Fall. Perhaps we could do a harvest theme.”

“Harvest moon theme?” Harold shook his head. “Not fun.”

“How about a spooky theme?” Victoria chewed her bottom lip. “Phantoms...or maybe even ghouls!”

April gasped, slamming her hand down on the wooden table we were sitting around. “That’s appalling! This is a *prestigious* academy, Victoria. Why would you even suggest that?”

“We could do a masked ball?” Ben suggested.

“The academy hasn’t done that theme in a few years, actually.” I nodded. “Hand up for a masquerade ball.”

I raised my hand along with everyone but April.

“Majority rules. This term’s theme is masquerade ball,” I stated, writing it down in my journal. “Victoria and Lina will be in charge of decorations and invitations.”

They nodded, and Victoria moved closer to Lina.

“April and Harold, I need you to secure the auditorium for the dance the day before graduation.”

“Why do you need both of us?” April snarked, but I ignored her since Harold nodded in compliance.

“George, I need you to get with Coach and verify the MANA ball game schedule for this term. Make sure he has everything ready for tonight’s game.”

“On it, boss.” He grinned.

“Ben, check with the professors and see what students need tutored.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sylvia, make sure the tutoring circle is still happy with their role.”

“You got it.”

“Meeting dismissed.” I waved to them as I spun on my heel and out of the student council room.

My head was throbbing. I knew it was from stress, but it wasn’t like I could avoid it.

I was raised with constant stress to outperform my peers and attain a diploma from this academy.

Honestly, I thought it was more for bragging rights than for my parents wanting the best for me. But being the only child of the two people who created Magic Company meant I had to fill the role they’d chosen for me.

My phone vibrated, and I saw that Mother was calling.

Taking a deep breath, I answered. “Hello?”

“Oh, Alderidge,” she scolded without waiting. “I told you that you need to answer your phone more professionally. You’re a Venturo, after all. Don’t embarrass us.”

“But it’s just you,” I explained, walking over to a random sofa in the Academy Center. “I answer properly when it’s needed.”

“Just me?” She scoffed. “I’m your mother. I expect to be properly addressed.”

“Sorry, Mother,” I mumbled, rubbing the heel of my palm against my temple. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I’m just checking in on you, Alderidge, dear. There’s a Charity Gala coming up that’s hosted by the Ashwoods,” she explained. “It’s next month, and I expect you to bring a date. How about that April girl on the council with you?”

I swallowed back the bile from her suggestion, and a certain first year with butterscotch-colored hair filled my mind once again. “She has zero hearts on her heart-o-meter, Mother. I’ll find my own date.”

“She’s a pretty girl, that April,” Mother went on. “She comes from a good family, and heart-o-meters aren’t everything, you know. Your father and I only have one. You should ask her to come. It would be a power move with our families.”

That was why my parents continuously had affairs on one another.

“I’ll pass, but thank you for your suggestion.”

She huffed. “At least think about it.”

“Goodbye, Mother. Have a lovely day.”

She huffed again. “Goodbye, Alderidge.”

Click.

I inhaled through my nostrils before blowing out with my mouth.

My parents were high-strung, but trying to tell me who to date was where I drew the line.

I'd been so busy with council duties and classes that I hadn't had a chance to see Prim or text her—something she still hadn't done.

We'd hit it off wonderfully, and she made me want to let down my inhibitions more than I'd ever desired to before. The way she flirted with me made my heart almost beat out of my chest.

Plus, her heart-o-meter was *maxed* out. That was unheard of, and I'd done research after meeting her. There was only one other instance of this in our history, but it was more of a fairy tale than anything, and it was all word of mouth. No real records.

I needed to look more into it, but my time was constantly occupied.

I swiped into my messages. I had a full inbox, yet no messages from Prim. I knew she was as interested in me as I was in her. The way she felt against me when she'd fallen on top of me had been the most feeling I'd ever had for a woman before.

Perhaps I needed to make the first move with her, but when would I find the time for it?

My thumbs tapped on the screen as I developed a message to Prim.

ALDERIDGE

Care to grab dinner tomorrow night?

SHE REPLIED ALMOST IMMEDIATELY.

PRIM

It's a date, Al. I've been meaning to talk to you.

MY HEART SWELLED WITH EXCITEMENT IN A WAY IT NEVER HAD done before.

With Prim, I felt like I could actually be myself. I'd never felt like that around anyone else. Not family nor friends.

I just had to come up with a good date since it would be my first one.

PRIMROSE

It was the most grueling few days, but I had to give Wells some credit. He avoided me like a pro, and I had yet to explain myself to him.

The sketch he'd drawn of me felt like it was burning a hole in my planner where I'd stuck it. I had no idea what was running through his head. He probably hated me now.

A white hot flush of pain seeped through me, but I gritted my teeth as I shoved my legs into a pair of jeans.

Raiden hadn't even attended class since the day Colt and Tate had officially announced our relationship status.

His absence was like a black hole in my chest. I'd had a message typed out to him on the inbox in my phone, but I couldn't bring myself to send it.

What I wanted to say needed to be said in person.

I just hoped I got the opportunity to do so.

I didn't even want to *think* about Cyrus. I'd seen him in class, but he wouldn't even spare a glance in my direction. He wouldn't even call on me to answer a question when I was the only one who raised their hand.

It made it harder to focus on classes, but one thing was clear for me academically, and that was that I preferred water and air magic over earth and fire.

Tugging Tate's jersey over my head, I slipped a pair of white tennis shoes on.

“Are you sure wearing that is such a good idea?” Leaf remarked, crossing her arms as she floated eye-level with me. “I mean, Raiden and Wells aren’t doing too well with your new relationship status. And have you told Colt and Tate about your date with Alderidge tomorrow night?”

I nibbled on my bottom lip, moving my hair around as I decided whether or not to wear it up or down. “I’m aware of that. Thanks, Leaf. And yes. I texted them in a group chat. They’re excited for the *third* to join.”

She snorted. “And they think that’ll be Alderidge?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I tossed my hair up into a messy bun on the top of my head before pulling down a couple of pieces to frame my face. “Al could be my third.”

“Doubtful.” She rolled her eyes. “He’s a traditional guy. He and Cyrus will be the harder ones to convince of your harem wishes.”

“I’ll convince them.” I turned to face her with a twirl. “What do you think?”

“I think you look like Tate’s girlfriend.”

“Because I am.” I pouted, smoothing out the jersey with Tate’s number 1 printed on the front. His last name, Mint, was scrawled across the back. “Can’t you just be supportive?”

“Oh, right,” she drawled. “Oh, Primrose, you look beautiful. You’re sure to woo the asses off all of your love interests tonight, even though four out of six think you chose others over them.”

I blinked slowly at her with a frown. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

“Anytime,” she snarked. “Now, off with you. Go and enjoy yourself.”

“I’m going, I’m going.” I waved goodbye to Leaf and headed next door.

I knocked on the door, and Colt threw it open.

His arms wrapped around me as he pulled me into him and lifted me up. “Good morning, pretty girl!”

He made my breath hitch as I wrapped my arms around his neck as he spun us around. “Good morning, Colt!” His bamboo and coconut smell had become so comforting to me, and I inhaled it before he let me down.

“Ready for the game tonight?” He winked, letting his flirty gaze trail down my outfit. “You look much hotter in his jersey than he does.”

“You think Tate’s hot in his jersey?” I teased.

“Well, yeah. He’s my best friend.” He rolled his eyes playfully as he shut and locked their door. “But my girlfriend is much hotter.”

“Oh, yeah?” My lips twitched in amusement.

“Definitely,” he purred. “Bet you’d look even hotter in *just* his jersey.”

Slick heat pooled in my belly as desire coated me just from his words. “You’re...really hot.”

“So you think I’m hot?” He smirked, lacing our fingers together and tugging me down the hall.

“You know I do.” I followed him, squeezing his hand.

“Have you been able to talk to Raiden or Wells?”

Guilt slammed into me, dousing my arousal like an ice bucket over my head. “No. Not yet, but I need to.”

“Let’s go get you a latte, pretty girl.” He grinned. “Then we can hunt down at least one of them.”

“Thanks, Colt. I bet we can buy you something with chocolate in it too,” I offered, and his green eyes brightened.

We walked hand-in-hand to the coffee shop in the Academy Center, and when we entered, my gaze immediately fell on Raiden’s.

His deep purple eyes caught mine and widened slightly. Then it dropped to where Colt and I held hands. His

expression fell, and he grabbed his drink and went out of the shop through the other doors in a speed walk.

“Colt.” I turned toward him.

“Go after him, pretty girl.” He smiled softly. “I’ll get you a vanilla latte and meet up with you after.”

“You’re the best.” My heart thumped wildly in my chest as I went to leave.

He tugged me back, and I fell against his chest, glancing up at him. His lips met mine, and he let go of me. “Yes, I am.”

I smiled at him before turning and going after Raiden.

Colt was the best kind of soul. He understood exactly what I wanted and why.

He knew that my desire for the others didn’t diminish what I felt about him, and I loved that the most about him. I was already falling for him, whether it was smart or not. I knew this new world I was in valued love more than my past world and life.

Raiden had already left the Academy Center, and he was in front of Water Hall by the time I caught up to him. “Raiden, wait!”

His entire body jolted to a stop, but he didn’t turn around.

Thankfully, there weren’t many people walking back and forth this morning since it was Saturday.

I ran around him until we were face to face.

The raw hurt and devastation marring his face was enough to knock the wind out of me.

I sucked in a lungful of air as I tried to gather my words. “Raiden...”

“Hey, little rose,” he rasped, watching me with rapt attention.

“I like you,” I blurted out.

His eyebrows lifted in shock. “You...what?”

I wrung my hands in front of me. “I know that probably sounds confusing because I’m dating Colt and Tate, and I like them. That’s not a lie. I do like them. But...I like you, too. I know that sounds selfish, and maybe it is, but that’s what my heart is telling me.”

His mouth had fallen open as I word vomited my explanation to him, and he reached up and scratched the back of his neck. “You like me?”

I nodded, catching my breath as the cool mist from the water sprayed into the air and landed on my hair, wetting it.

“And you like Colt and Tate?”

I nodded again.

“But you are dating Colt and Tate?”

“Yes, but I want to be with you, too.” My chest heaved as I breathed heavily, nerves fluttering through my stomach. “And there are others I have feelings for.”

His expression flitted through several emotions, but it settled on disbelief.

“Is it too much to ask of you? I understand if it is.”

He slowly shook his head. “I’m obsess—I mean...” He trailed off with a cough before running both hands through his hair. “I like you, too. I’m not keen on *sharing* you with anyone, but if that’s the one way I’ll have you, then I’m in.”

“You mean it?” My jaw slackened, and hope spurred to life in my gut. That was a little *too* easy. “You’d be okay with me being in a relationship with all of you?”

He reached out between us, his trembling fingers brushing my lower lip. “I’m okay with being yours.”

Heat bloomed in my chest. “Even if I have others?”

“Yes.”

Was this okay? Pursuing this many men when this *wasn't* a game? I didn’t want to hurt any of them. But I still wanted them. All of them.

Not for achievements or bragging rights like before. I wanted them because they made my heart flutter in ways I hadn't experienced before.

My memory of my past life might have been fading, but I knew in my heart that I'd never felt like this before.

"And you're sure?" I asked hesitantly.

"Does this answer your question?" His head dipped down, and his mouth sealed over mine.

The kiss was oddly possessive for a man who'd just agreed to share me, but I was greedy for it. I longed to be desired the way he desired me.

He pulled me closer with a groan, his fingers threading into my now-wet hair as he angled my face up to deepen the kiss.

The warmth of his body seeped into mine, and I wrapped my arms around his neck. Our tongues slicked together as he kissed me.

He tasted like raspberries and espresso, and I couldn't get enough of it.

"Damn, pretty girl. All I said was go after him." Colt's teasing voice hit my ears. "I didn't say to make out with him in front of Water Hall."

I smirked against Raiden's lips, but Raiden straightened, breaking our kiss in one quick movement.

His eyes landed on Colt cautiously, but he didn't pull away from me completely. "You told her to come after me?"

"Of course." Colt offered me my latte, and I snagged it happily.

The heat from the cup warmed my hands as I held it. "Thank you."

"Anything for Primrose." Colt shrugged, eyes twinkling with excitement. "She wanted you, so that meant she needed the opportunity to explain things to you so she could have you."

Tate and I welcome you with open arms into our relationship centered around Primrose.”

“Seriously?” His eyes widened again as he unraveled from me.

“Yes.” Colt chuckled, tucking me into his side instead to shield me from the water spray. “So, Raiden, have any siblings?”

Raiden’s brows furrowed, and he stepped back a step. “Why?”

“Relax. I’m just trying to get to know you since we’re dating the same girl.”

“Dating?” His voice went up an octave, and his gaze snapped to me. “You and I?”

“If you want to, I do.” I smiled softly.

He shoved his hands into his hair with a deep breath. “I mean...I thought that you weren’t interested in me until now, but yeah, I’d love to date you. I have since I first saw you and your heart-o-meter was filled completely.”

“Yours too?” Colt gushed. “Tate and I saw the same, and it was the coolest thing ever. I knew then that she was meant for us. Clearly, for you too.”

Raiden ducked his head in a blush. “Yeah. I see that.”

“So, siblings?” Colt asked again.

“None,” he replied briskly.

“Yeah, I know that. But I just wanted you to say it because that’s our common ground!” Colt exclaimed, reaching over and patting Raiden’s shoulder. “I’m an only child, too!”

How did he already know that about Raiden?

“What about you?” Raiden slid his gaze to me again.

“Oh, um...I feel like I had a sister at one point.” My brows bumped together in concentration, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t actually remember a sister or any other sibling. “Or maybe I wanted one. I’m not sure.”

“What about your parents?” Colt asked.

I shook my head. I couldn't actually remember anything about my past life or this life when it came to childhood, but it made sense. I technically was reborn into this world by magic. I wasn't born by anyone.

An odd longing ached in my chest, but as I stared at Colt and Raiden, it eased.

“Are you going to the game tonight?” I directed the question to Raiden.

Worry washed over Colt's face, but Raiden shook his head and kept his expression neutral.

“Crowds aren't really my thing.” He frowned, glancing around.

“Didn't you invite her to a Charity Gala?” Colt took a drink of his mocha frappe and groaned. “You're right, pretty girl. Chocolate coffee isn't so bad.”

I tucked one of the pieces of hair that hung down from my bun behind my ear. “Told ya so.”

“Yeah, I did,” Raiden murmured, a blush appearing across his cheeks. “I wasn't sure if she was still coming, though.”

I choked on the mouthful of coffee and spewed it on the ground. “I'm coming!”

He chuckled, and the heaviness that had been around him seemed to lift. “I'm glad. I would've hated to go without you on my arm.”

“It's a good thing you're stuck with me. No taking that invite back.” I winked. “I've never been to a gala before.”

Raiden's phone went off, and he looked at the caller before tensing again. “It's my father.”

“Call him back later.” I took another delicious drink.

Colt shook his head. “You have no idea who his dad is, do you?”

I frowned and moved the cup from my lips. “Why? Should I?”

“Raiden’s the son of *Ashland Ashwood*.” Colt said his name slowly. “It’s how I knew he was also an only child. By the way, I still want to bond over that, dude.”

Obviously the name didn’t ring any bells for me. I mean, I was new to this world. I didn’t even know if wherever this academy was based in was a democracy or a monarchy.

I didn’t even know the basic geography here. Where were we even located?

“Okay.” I furrowed my brows.

I was clearly missing basic information about Raiden and his family.

Raiden huffed out a weak laugh. “I love that you don’t know. It’s better that way, but I do need to take this. I’ll see you later, little rose.”

He dropped a kiss to my forehead before walking toward the dormitory and answering his phone with an irritated tone.

I almost wished I knew what they were talking about.

“Who is Ashland Ashwood?” I asked Colt as we went inside Water Hall to avoid the water mist on the path. “It doesn’t seem like Raiden likes his dad.”

“He’s richer than anyone I’ve heard of, and he’s an elite. There’s not too much about him known, though. Other than Raiden being his only son. I don’t know how the relationship between the two is. No one really does. I don’t even know what the guy does, just that he’s stupidly rich.” Colt’s phone started to ring. “Hold that thought, pretty girl.”

He answered his phone. “Hello? Yeah. I’m with Primrose...*Mom*. No. I mean, we are in Water Hall. Will it be quick?” He groaned loudly and stopped walking. “I forgot. Yes. I’m on my way.”

He hung up and stuffed his phone back into his pocket. “Mom needs my help with prepping some project for next week, and it’s time for our weekly lunch. Also, she said hi and

next time, you should come with us.” He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against his chest. “I’ll meet up with you before the game?”

“Sounds great.” I looked up at him. “Tell her I said hi back, and I’ll definitely join next time.”

“Sure thing.” He cupped my face and kissed my lips softly. “Watching you kiss Raiden just made me want to kiss you again.” He peppered a few more kisses on my lips before letting me go. “See you later, pretty girl.”

“See you later.” My cheeks flamed with heat as he walked toward his mom’s room.

I spun around to head out of the building but stopped abruptly as my gaze locked with Wells’s blue eyes.

His heart-o-meter flashed.

My heart twisted violently in my chest cavity before it dropped.

“Wells!” I hollered at him, but he turned and speed walked down the hallway. “Wait!”

I pushed my feet to move forward to run after him, but a body moved in front of me and blocked my way.

Irritation spread through me. “Kevin,” I seethed, trying to move past him, but he kept getting in my way.

“Hi, Primrose,” he stated way too enthusiastically, and I noticed Wells disappear into one of the rooms.

My heart sank. “What do you want?”

“Just wanted to send you a message from Caryn.” He grinned, flashing his teeth. “She said you better renounce the title of Tate’s girlfriend. Also, she’s endgame. You’re just a fleeting game.”

I frowned, crossing my arms. “That’s only true if it’s desired by both parties. It’s not. Tate’s not into her.”

“Because she cheated, but she cheated with me. Tate and I used to be friends.” He shrugged, stepping closer. “He

wouldn't share her with me. Got all pissed about betrayal. But now look at what he's doing with you and Colt."

I stepped back as an eerie chill zipped down my spine. "Look, none of this is your business. If Caryn has a problem, she needs to take it up with me and not send weirdos to creep me out."

"Look..." His lips curled into a sneer as he stepped into my space again. "I'm just warning you that if you don't stop, then something you won't like might happen."

"Are you threatening her, Kevin?" Cyrus's teacher-like voice sliced through the growing volatile tension.

Kevin's face paled, and he threw his hands up in defense. "Nah. Sorry if it seemed that way, Professor Rowe."

Cyrus crossed his arms over his chest as he stepped between us. "I'm sure you won't be doing that again."

"Course not," he replied.

I glowered at him as he pivoted and took off the other way without saying anything else.

Letting out a heavy breath, my shoulders sagged in relief. Wells was already gone, so I couldn't talk to him now.

But Cyrus had actually stepped in to save me from potential bullying. That had to be an opening, right?

"Cyrus, I've been wanting to talk to—"

"Not here." He slipped his fingers around my upper arm and tugged me into his classroom. Letting go, he forked his fingers through his hair with a stuttered sigh.

"Rumors have been circulating about you, Primrose." His gaze flicked above my head and back to mine. "Maybe you should attempt to stay away from Tate. He brings drama with him."

My lips parted slightly before I smooshed them together to contain a frustrated scream.

How dare he warn me off staying away from my boyfriend? I knew it was coming from jealousy since his two

hearts flashed within his heart-o-meter, but it didn't feel like a win to me.

Inhaling through my nostrils, I blew air from my mouth in a huffed breath. "Thanks for your advice, *Mr. Rowe*, but Tate's not the problem. Caryn is."

In a flash, he'd caged me against the door, leaning into my personal space until his nose brushed mine.

My breath hitched as heat flooded me, and his spring-like scent filled my senses.

"I know I told you to call me that, but it hurts more than I thought it would," he croaked, a tortured look plastered on his face. "And you're involved with two other men."

"*Cyrus...*" My fingertips grazed the door behind me, and my pulse echoed through my skull.

I could feel every beat of my heart in every part of my body.

"Better." He inhaled before swallowing hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. He leaned forward, and his forehead rested against mine. "*Much* better."

His blue eyes pierced my very soul.

"About Colt and Tate..." I trailed off as anguish crossed his features once again. "I—"

Knock knock.

Cyrus groaned, peeling himself from me by pushing off the door. "Yes?"

"It's me," a sweet feminine voice called out. "We're going to be late for lunch!"

"I'll be out in a second," he told her, but his eyes never left mine. "What about them?"

I shook my head, pain funneling through my chest. "Doesn't matter, I guess. Your lunch date's waiting."

Cyrus's lips twitched into an amused smirk. "Primrose, my lunch date is my sister."

“Your *sister*?” Relief doused the jealousy rearing its head inside of me.

The door pushed open, smacking my back and pushing me into Cyrus’s chest with rough force.

“*Cy, come on!*”

His arms wound around me to keep me steady as he stumbled backward for the door to open. My foot caught on my other foot, and I pressed even further against him.

A loud gasp sounded from behind us as I gripped his shirt to regain my balance.

Glancing up, our eyes locked. Longing and adoration surged through me, and his grip on me tightened.

I turned my head to look behind us, ripping my gaze from Cyrus.

A woman my age stood at the entrance with her mouth wide open.

She looked *just like* Cyrus.

Long, straight silver hair fell around her, and her blue eyes were wide with shock.

She slammed her mouth shut and closed the door as she slipped in. “We can totally cancel lunch.” Her lips curved into a teasing smile. “I’m a *cool* sister. Who’s this?”

“I’m Primrose,” I squeaked my introduction, turning back toward Cyrus, who had wiped his face of any earlier emotion.

Disappointment snaked through me.

He let go of my waist and stepped back, scrubbing a hand over his jaw. “She was just leaving.”

“I need to talk to you,” I insisted, wrapping my arms around my midsection in an attempt to recreate his body warmth that had felt so right.

“I’m not sure if there’s anything you can say that can make much of a difference.”

A tick of pain struck in my heart before spreading to my shoulders and throbbing. “Cyrus, *please*.”

“Damn, Cy, listen to her before deciding that,” his sister scolded him, stepping next to me and holding her hand out to me. “I’m Liza.”

“Nice to meet you,” I mumbled, shaking her hand in mine. “Thank you.”

I glanced at Cyrus, but the moment our eyes met again, he set his jaw and looked off toward the wall.

“Do you want to join us for lunch?” Liza offered, letting go of my hand.

Cyrus’s head snapped toward his sister with his mouth parting, I was sure to protest, but I shook my head.

“Thank you for inviting me, but I need to take a shower before the game tonight,” I declined against my better judgment.

Saying no tasted bitter, but Cyrus wasn’t ready to hear what I had to say yet.

I didn’t actually want a shower since I showered last night, but this entire day had me sweating from a mix of anxiety and the heat.

Plus, standing next to Water Hall soaked my hair earlier.

“We’ll talk later,” I promised Cyrus. “Just hear me out before you shut me out...*please*.”

He tipped his head in a quick nod. “We will see.”

“Bye, Primrose,” Liza said brightly with a warm smile and a wave. “I’m in Intermediate classes, but we should make time to hang out soon. I have a feeling we’d be great friends!”

“Liza,” Cyrus hissed, combing his fingers through his ponytail resting on his shoulder.

“That would be great.” My heart swelled. I hadn’t made a single female friend, other than Leaf, since coming here, but I hadn’t been wanting one when I thought I was just playing a dating simulation.

Having a friend would be really nice.

“I’ll text you later, and we can plan something.” She grinned wildly, ignoring her brother’s pleading, panicked look her way.

Liza seemed sweet, and I appreciated that she tried to get her brother to at least hear me out.

Unfortunately, that was something only Cyrus could do.

PRIMROSE

I'd never been a fan of communal bathrooms, but the showers in the dormitory weren't as terrible as I had expected.

The girls' bathroom was at one end of the hall, and the boys' was at the other. The girls' was the last door on the left, away from the stairwell, and when I first realized I didn't have a bathroom attached to my room, I had to admit I was nervous.

The bathrooms here were luxurious as far as bathrooms went. It had a pretty white tile floor with white walls and gray shiplap on one wall. There was a long counter with multiple sink basins and mirrors above them that held bright lights. The toilets were stall-type, which helped with the privacy I'd been concerned about.

The showers were individually enclosed by walls and an entrance curtain, and as I stood behind the two-layered curtain, I felt a sense of calm wash over me.

The first drops of water had been bitterly cold, but now, steam filled the enclosed area as I worked the shampoo into my scalp.

Hot water cascaded down my body, and I tilted my head back to rinse out the shampoo.

My mind filled with thoughts of the guys and my future with them.

Al was so busy that I bet he didn't know anything about me dating the others. If he'd heard about it, he hadn't said

anything to me, and that didn't seem like his style. I planned to explain everything tomorrow evening at dinner, anyway. I just hoped he would take it well because I couldn't handle the alternative.

Colt had become a constant for me. He was someone I knew would be there for me. He did whatever he could to make sure I felt happy and safe. He'd been begging me to let him go and *knock some sense* into the rest of the guys, but that was something I needed to do myself.

Tate was busy with MANA ball practice more than I had expected, but his free time was spent with me so that was more than I could've asked for. He was great at distracting me and keeping me out of my own head. I didn't want to call him a distraction because he was so much more than that. It was like he knew when I needed his goofing off and helped me have fun when I needed it. He was a breath of fresh air.

Cyrus finally breaking down to talk to me was good, but it could've been better had his sister not interrupted. I hadn't gotten to explain, and he'd shut himself off again. Though, I did like Liza. I needed to remember to reach out to her later. Maybe I would be able to get her on the Cyrus and Primrose boat.

Raiden's immediate acceptance of my explanation made my heart flutter. Although, I wasn't sure why he was so agreeable. Regardless, I couldn't wait to get to know him more. I already knew his lips were downright sinful, and I wanted to kiss him again.

Wells was the one love interest that kept running from me, but the sketch he'd dropped of me told me that he at least thought of me. I just needed to find out if that was good or bad.

I twisted the water handle to the off position and swiped my hands over my head, guiding the water over my soaked hair. The excess water hit with a splash on the floor.

A cold shiver worked its way down my limbs as I reached for the towel hanging over the curtain rod only to come up empty handed.

I slid the curtain and looked down to see if it had fallen, but my towel and the tote I carried my clothes in were gone.

All I had was my caddy and arrangements of soaps and shampoos.

How had I not noticed?

Thank *gods* I'd left Tate's jersey in my room.

My gaze lifted from the ground where my tote bag had sat with my belongings and up to freaking Caryn.

She stood with her arms crossed in front of my shower and a smug smirk on her pink-painted lips. "Missing something?"

Her two minions stood beside her with their arms crossed, and they looked like generic forms of Caryn herself.

Caryn's long black hair was straight behind her, and her blue eyes burned with hatred.

The girl that had called me a slut before, Dana, I think, had shoulder-length black hair that was pulled halfway up in a clip. Her brown eyes filled with contempt as she turned her nose up at me.

The other one, Chelsea, I believed, had curls sticking every which way as they tumbled to her mid-back. Her green eyes filled with something more like pity.

The three of them truly looked like some rip-off superhero poster with the way they were posed.

"Are you deaf?" Dana snapped.

"Caryn asked you a question," Chelsea stated slowly as if she were speaking to me like I was unable to comprehend what she was saying.

I gripped the curtain tighter. "Where's my stuff?"

"Oh, Dana was being helpful and set it in front of your dorm room." Caryn grinned widely, inspecting her cuticles.

Shoot. I'd underestimated her. I didn't think anyone would actually do this, though.

If it were a dating simulation, I'd have the option of staying here and crying or covering myself up the best I could and bracing the eyes of the rest of the student body, but this was real life.

Did I have the same options? My phone was in my tote bag.

Glancing down at my body, water droplets rolled off me in bulk.

"Real mature," I huffed out. "Stealing clothes."

"I didn't steal anything." Dana was quick to protest.

"I didn't say you could touch my belongings. You stole." I blinked at her.

"Looks like you'll just have to stay here." Caryn sighed dramatically.

"Too bad you'll miss the game." Chelsea gave me a look filled with pity again.

"Don't worry, though. Caryn will be cheering for Tate," Dana assured me.

"And I've put a sign on the door that closes this bathroom off for maintenance." Caryn cackled like a bad villain, which was exactly what she was. "You'll be here awhile. Oh! But don't worry, the halls are pretty empty at night. Maybe you can sneak into your room then."

Taking a deep breath, I made my decision. I grabbed my caddy and shoved the curtain to the side and stepped carefully on the tile as water dripped off me and onto it, making it slippery. "I'm not missing the game."

I was happy that I was confident in my body. If not, I probably would've stayed in the shower.

The three of them gasped in shock.

"What do you think you're doing?" Caryn sputtered in outrage.

"You really are a slut!" Dana shouted.

I shrugged, moving around them and placing my hand on the doorknob. “Better a slut than a bully.”

Working up my courage, I pushed the door open and walked out with the caddy in front of my pussy and my arm over my breasts.

“Holy fucking shit,” Kevin breathed in shock as he kicked off the wall beside the girls’ bathroom and fumbled with his phone.

There were a few men and women lingering about, and they all looked at me in shock, but Kevin was the only one that tried to take photos.

Down the hall, my tote bag was indeed in front of my dorm room.

“It’s just a body.” I rolled my eyes and continued walking, hellbent on getting to my tote. “We all have one.”

It was only a body, but it was *my* body.

My heart battered in my chest, and dizziness swept over me as anxiety crept in.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Raiden snarled, disgust twisted on his expression as he stormed down the hall.

I didn’t even realize he’d been here, and my heart clogged my throat at the rage eclipsing his face.

His stomps were long strides as he closed the distance between us, whipping his black shirt off and tugging it over my head in an instant. The soft fabric that smelled just like him reached just below my ass, but it was enough to cover me up.

He’d grabbed the caddy so I could stick my arms through, and I took it back with a shaky hand.

“Raiden, I—”

“Not you, little rose.” He gritted his teeth and moved past me. “I’m talking to the piece of shit taking photos of a naked woman without consent.”

He snatched Kevin's phone out of his hand and threw it on the ground with a breaking clatter. His foot came on it until all the little pieces of the device shattered.

Then, he bent down and grabbed the memory card, pocketing it.

"What the fuck, you freak?" Kevin pushed Raiden, making him stumble only slightly. "What are you talking about consent? The bitch shouldn't have come out here prancing around naked if she didn't want attention. Why do you care, anyway? Is she slutting herself out for you now, too?"

Raiden's fist flew into Kevin's face with a satisfying crunch.

Kevin hit the ground a moment later, and he didn't get back up.

Gasps rang out in the hall around us, and the whispers about Raiden hit my ears.

They were more concerned with Raiden's violence than Kevin's sexual harassment.

"Caryn, Dana, and Chelsea stole my towel, clothes, and phone. They're also the ones that put the out of business sign on the bathroom door so nobody could help me," I announced to the rest of the bystanders, irritation flaring through me. "Just so you're aware that I did this as a last resort."

Raiden pivoted from Kevin and walked back to me, tucking me under his arm and to his side in a protective gesture.

Caryn and her posse came out with horrified expressions.

They'd definitely been listening.

"We didn't know you were in there!" Chelsea claimed innocently. "We were just trying to return your tote bag."

"You only came out because I outed you." I leaned against Raiden.

I just wanted to curl up in a ball next to him and not be bothered.

“Wow. *Another* man.” Caryn snorted, rage flashing in her eyes. “You’re a whore. You wanted people to see you naked, didn’t you? The Ashwood’s heir, no less.”

“You *know* she’s only prancing around him for the money.” Dana’s expression screwed into disgust.

“Why else?” Caryn laughed. “Raiden’s a weirdo. Even his dad stays away from him.”

Raiden’s presence calmed me, and I respected him far before I knew his family dynamics.

“Shut your mouth, or I’ll shut it for you,” I said dangerously low, glaring holes into her with what I was sure was a murderous expression. “Raiden’s a better person than you’ll ever be.”

She shut her mouth, and her face paled. “Come on, girls. Let’s not give her the audience she wants.”

“Kevin!” Chelsea shouted in shock as she noticed the pervert on the ground.

“Let’s get you in your dorm,” Raiden murmured, tugging me to follow him. “You shouldn’t have to deal with this.”

The rest of the students in the hall shot me a range full of looks as the three girls fussed over Kevin to get him conscious. Pity, concern, interest, outrage, and excitement showed on their faces. But none of them said a word, and I preferred that.

Raiden bent down to grab my tote, and he snagged my keycard from the top to unlock the room before ushering me inside.

He shut the door with a soft click. “You okay, little rose?”

I shook my head, striding toward my bed and plopping down on it with a sigh. “I just walked naked in front of at least eight random people.”

“What?” Leaf snapped, jolting from her bed and flying her little leafy self over to me. “What in the world happened?” She glanced at Raiden with acceptance. “Hi, Raiden.”

“Hello.” He dipped his head. “No wonder why she’s gotten so lucky in the love department. It’s an honor to meet you.”

She grinned wildly, showing off her flowery teeth. “See. That’s the respect I deserve, Primrose.” She turned back to me and took in the fact that I wore only Raiden’s shirt. “Now, explain.”

“Caryn and her friends stole all her clothes and phone. She came back to the room covering as much as she could. Kevin took pictures so I smashed his phone.” Raiden shrugged. “That’s about it.”

“Why didn’t you use the extra towels the bathroom provides or a washcloth?” Leaf groaned as she scolded me. “I mean, I’ve seen you naked, and that’s nothing to be embarrassed about, but still. It’s indecent!”

“They took those.” I scowled. “I only had my caddy, and I use a silicone scrubber instead of a washcloth.”

“Of course you do.” She let out a puff of air before patting my head. “You did good, then.”

“Thanks.” I fell back on the bed with a loud groan, feeling the air hit where Raiden’s shirt lifted.

“Indecent!” Leaf scolded me again before flying out of the room and shutting the door with a slam.

I sat back up and pushed his shirt between my legs where I’d just exposed myself to him. “Sorry.”

Raiden shook his head and sat down next to me, offering me my tote. “Not really something you should apologize to me over. I’m pretty clear about my interest in you, little rose.”

My cheeks flamed, but my lower abdomen pooled with a heat that made me want to strip his shirt off and mount him.

He’d already seen me naked.

Being reincarnated meant I was a virgin, right?

I shook my head of my thoughts and took the tote. “Thanks, Raiden.”

My voice was huskier than usual, but Raiden didn't seem to notice.

"You should check your messages just in case she went through your phone," he told me.

"I have a lock on it." I shrugged, grabbing the phone and double-checking the messages just to be sure. "It doesn't look like there's anything."

"That's good." He cleared his throat. "Do you think you should get ready?"

My brows dipped. "There's still an hour left before Colt will be here to pick me up for the game."

"You look stunning in my shirt," he murmured, glancing away with a blush. He still wore a shirt, though, even after whipping his first off.

"Why do you wear two shirts?" I blurted the question, staring at his arms that were tattooed with cats.

Freaking cats! How adorable.

He swallowed an audible gulp. "Why do you insist on keeping my other one on?"

"I'm sorry." I straightened my spine and glanced down. "Do you want it back?"

"You can keep it." He turned to me with dark desire in his purple eyes, and my insides turned to mush. "It looks better on you."

How could one being look so sinful from one look?

"What's wrong?" I asked, pushing his shirt between my legs further, partly to cover up and partly to ease the throbbing desire there.

"Fuck, little rose." His gaze dipped to where I placed the shirt. "If you don't stop, I'm not going to be able to contain myself."

"Contain yourself from what?" I urged, pressing against my core again.

“From kneeling before you and spreading your thighs,” he stated without a beat of hesitation.

“What if...” I bit my lip, trying to line up a thought but coming up empty. “What if I didn’t want you to contain yourself? What if I wanted you to do that?”

“Then I’d do it,” he replied instantly, and his tongue rolled across his bottom lip. “Do you want me to, little rose? Will you allow me the pleasure of making you come on my tongue?”

“Yes, Raiden,” I rasped.

He dropped in front of me on his knees and slid both hands between them in a prayer motion before using the back of each hand to spread my legs away from each other. The air hit my wetness with a cold breeze, but it didn’t stay that way for long.

“*Gods*. You open up like the little rose you are.” His fingers bit into the flesh of my thighs as he held my legs apart.

“Your mouth is like a fantasy,” I blurted out, desire for him burning my brain.

“I’ll show you just how much of a fantasy it can be.” He nuzzled my thigh before latching onto my clit.

A sharp gasp escaped me as his tongue set off a blinding heat inside of me. “Raiden!”

His tongue lashed inside of me, working me open, driving me absolutely feral, and he moved his finger to my clit, carefully playing with it to push me toward a climax.

My thighs clenched around his head, and my fingers tangled into his hair as he continued his assault on my already-soaked pussy.

His moans vibrated through my very soul, and with one last bold swipe of his tongue, I was sent spinning into pleasure’s arms without another thought.

Gods, what was his tongue made of?

I lost my grip on his hair and fell back onto the bed in a heap.

My legs shook and quivered as my heartbeat pounded through every part of my body, almost annoyingly.

I pushed back on my elbows and stared at him. “Where did you learn to do that?”

He lapped a few more times before pulling back, his smirking lips glistening with my pleasure. Pleasure *he* created.

“I’ve watched porn, but I think it’s the romance novels,” he admitted, licking his lips with a groan that made my core alight with desire again. “That was the first time I’ve ever eaten someone out.”

“It’s the romance novels, and just so we’re clear, please never hesitate to do that.” I sucked in a deep breath. “I mean it. Full access. Any time, anywhere.”

His chuckle glided over me, and my chest tightened in longing from the sound. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Come here,” I mumbled, reaching for him.

He climbed over me, peppering kisses over my face softly before rolling off and pulling me against his chest. “So how does this work?”

“How does what work?” I glanced up at him.

His lashes brushed his cheeks as he blinked. “Being a part of your harem, I guess. I know Colt and Tate are dating you, and now me. Anyone else with high heart-o-meters that could potentially join us?”

“Well, I’ve kissed Colt and you, but you and I were the first to be any type of intimate.” I snuggled against him, feeling safe in his arms. “Our relationship is separate from my relationship with Colt’s and Tate’s. But at the same time, if one of us is doing something that’s bothering the other, it needs to be discussed. I’d like it if you could all be friends, though.”

“Anything for you.” His fingers traced a pattern on my thigh, sending pleasant tingles through me.

“There’s also Alderidge, who I’m going on a date with tomorrow,” I told him. “Then there’s Cyrus, who I still need to talk with. And Wells, who keeps running from me.”

He let out a low whistle. “Six of us?”

“Yes.” My words muffled as I hid my face in his chest. “I feel things for all of you.”

“Little rose...” He cupped my head in his hands and made me look at him. “I’m not upset by that. My feelings for you aren’t going to change based on others. As long as I’m not blindsided with a break up or someone else we haven’t previously discussed, I’m good.”

Heat pricked my eyes at his devotion, and I leaned forward and kissed him again. “Thank you, Raiden.”

Leaf opened the door with Colt in tow, and his eyes widened as he took in the state of us in my bed.

As always, Colt’s reaction surprised me.

“Oh, come on!” He tossed his hands in the air with a whine. “Why do I always miss out?”

Unfortunately, Leaf’s reaction had been expected.

She slapped a hand to her head and sighed loudly like I was nothing but a bother. “In our shared room, really, Primrose?”

PRIMROSE

Colt had been overly disappointed that he'd missed out, and he begged Raiden to give him details—which he only gave with my permission. I had to admit, hearing the way they talked about me intimately together made butterflies erupt in my belly in the best way.

They'd bonded, and they seemed to get along well even without me being the topic of conversation.

Raiden told Colt what had happened in the showers with Caryn and her gang, and what Kevin did in the hallway.

Colt was *pissed*. I'd never seen his fists wound so tightly. He high-fived Raiden when he got to the part of him punching Kevin, and he was determined to punch him himself.

Raiden kissed me goodnight before heading back to his room, and Colt waited for me to get ready for the game.

Once I was ready, he'd laced our fingers together and tugged me to the MANA ball field like there was a fire under our asses.

It had been cooler than I'd thought it to be, and goosebumps prickled my flesh.

The field was nothing like I had expected. Golden grains of sand covered the rectangular arena, and a gold-adorned wooden fence enclosed it. Benches surrounded the field on the longer sides, and the difference in team colors showed clearly which was our home side.

Opposing team jerseys were blue and white, whereas our colors were maroon and black. The other team sat in staggered clusters on their side, and our numbers far surpassed theirs.

Colt and I somehow managed to snag the front row on our home side.

Unfortunately, so did Caryn and her gang of mean girls.

“Did you notice the number Caryn’s wearing?” Colt whispered harshly.

I glanced over. Sure enough, it was a close replica to mine. It made sense that fans could buy players’ jerseys, but seeing Caryn proudly wear Tate’s made my skin crawl. He’d been so freaking blunt with her, and she just kept going.

I shot her a venomous look, and she smirked back at me.

Fury swept through me, and I clenched my jaw so tight it hurt as I turned my head away from her. “Distract me.”

He grabbed my chin and tilted my head up before his lips descended upon mine in a comforting and sweet kiss before pulling away with a smile. “Better?”

“Much.” My heart fluttered as I focused forward where the teams had just taken the field.

My gaze found Tate without trying. He wore a maroon uniform, and the pants hugged his butt so perfectly. His last name stood in large, proud letters on his back, and a glove was on his hand. It sparked with magic. I was probably drooling at the sight of him. “Tate looks so freaking good.”

“He *is* captain,” Colt pointed out with a bump to my shoulder.

“I’ve never seen a MANA ball game before,” I said over the chatter around us.

Colt whipped his head toward me. “Do you know the rules?”

“Tate explained it to me before. The players form an orb of an element called a MANA ball, right?”

I watched Tate stretch, and I had to reel in my crazy as I realized Caryn was doing the same as I was.

“There’s always twelve members on a team, and there are three designated players of each element. Tate’s element is water,” he told me.

“Oh, I remember.” I giggled, remembering how I’d met Tate. “He soaked me with his MANA ball when we first met.”

“That’s right.” He grinned. “He wouldn’t stop talking about you after that.”

“The feeling is mutual.” I shrugged. “Same way I couldn’t stop thinking of you after seeing you locked outside your dorm in only a towel.”

He glared at Tate before it softened. “That prank was probably the only one I can’t be mad at him for because it’s how I met you, pretty girl.”

“Your prank wars are hilarious.”

Colt and Tate really were constantly pranking each other. Colt had even pretended to be me sleeping after a nap session together in my room, and Tate had slid into bed with him. It took him slinging an arm around him before he noticed it wasn’t me.

He’d been so mad at Colt, and he hated how much I laughed at it. I’d woken up and started studying like we were supposed to be doing.

A shrill whistle pierced the stadium, and I jumped. “What was that?”

“It’s starting,” Colt told me.

I watched entranced as Tate formed his MANA ball. The water inside swirled and sloshed while a magical blue glow emitted from it.

The rest of the players did the same. The fire balls were the most frightening, and I wondered how they avoided burning anyone. Accidents could happen in any sport, though, and that was the most concerning.

Tate rushed someone with a fireball on the other team with precision.

I tensed, latching onto Colt's arm as we watched him throw his MANA ball at the opposing team member's.

Tate's water collided with the fire, and steam billowed from the contact before the other team's ball evaporated.

The home crowd erupted into cheers, and Caryn screamed his name.

Irritation flared in me, but Colt wrapped his arm around my shoulders as he shouted for Tate, too.

I joined in. "Go, Tate! Destroy those balls!"

Colt bent over in laughter, his arm falling off of me as he did. "You're the best, oh my gods."

My face heated slightly as a few people glanced at me with amusement.

Tate scanned the crowd before landing on me, and he grinned with a little wave. He didn't stick around, though, as he called his MANA ball back to him and hollered something to one of his teammates before going after another fire user.

"Tate's ruthless in this game," Colt shouted over the cheers and chants of the crowds. "It's why he's made captain so early!"

It was a free-for-all, and it was addictive to watch. I'd never been a huge sports fan, but magical sports were really fun.

From what I could tell, water extinguished fire and sometimes wind, fire burned earth and sometimes wind, earth stopped water and sometimes wind, and wind put out fire and sometimes earth. It was all rather confusing, but to be honest, I just watched Tate the whole time.

He went after all of the fire users and succeeded in destroying their MANA balls before halftime was called. I didn't know it was halftime until Colt told me, but apparently, that meant we could see Tate.

That was all it took for a goofy smile to stay plastered on my lips.

I glanced around, and my spine clicked straight as I noticed Cyrus directly behind us a few rows, sitting with his sister.

Forcing my gaze off his, I found Al behind us one row but to the right, sitting with a few people I didn't recognize.

I swallowed the lump in my throat with a wince.

"There he is!" Colt wrapped his arm around my shoulders again and turned me toward where Tate was coming over.

People reached out and slapped him on his back or tried touching him, and it irritated me that he was being touched so much.

He dodged Caryn's outstretched arms before making it to us, and he wasted no time pulling me into his sweaty chest and squeezing me tightly. "Thanks for wearing it, babe."

"Duh. Gotta represent my boyfriend," I teased with a cheesy smile as I pulled back and noticed Kevin had walked behind him and was hugging Caryn. He sported two swollen black eyes.

As he pulled back, Colt sucked in a gleeful sharp breath. "Shit. Raiden did that?"

"Yes." I grinned.

"Raiden's the one who did that?" Tate's gaze widened. "What'd Kevin do?"

"Took a photo of our naked girlfriend after Caryn and her squad stole her clothes and towel from the showers," Colt told him in a tense tone. "Raiden punched him and destroyed his phone."

Darkness crossed his gaze as he glowered at Kevin and Caryn. "What the fuck?"

Kevin's lips curled into a smirk as he bent down and whispered into Caryn's ear. She glanced over with a haughty smile on her face before their group came over toward us.

“Tate, you played amazing as usual.” Caryn’s smile turned sweeter for him.

His jaw muscles twitched, and he clutched me to his side, sweat dripping off him and onto me.

She blinked owlshly at him. “What?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he snapped, venom dripping from each word. “Stealing her clothes from her while she’s in the shower?”

She giggled, hiding her smile behind her hand slightly. “I just took a page from you for pranking. You did it to Colt. It’s not my fault she can’t take a joke.”

“I left him a gods damn towel!” he exploded, his body vibrating with anger. “You weren’t pranking her. You were being mean like always.”

“I’m not mean!” she gasped.

“Look, it’s not her fault your girl is a whore and chose to walk out naked. She could’ve hid out in the bathroom.” Kevin shrugged before staring at me, a sleazy gaze raking down my body. “You’ve got all these boyfriends. Why don’t you entertain me too? It’s not like I haven’t already seen you naked.”

I opened my mouth, prepared with a snarky reply to the jerk, but Colt and Tate both summoned magic instead.

“Fire breath,” Colt muttered and breathed fire at Kevin, lighting him up. The air warmed from the spell.

“High pressure water.” Contempt spilled out of Tate along with his water magic, pelting the flames with water and knocking Kevin flat on his back.

Kevin’s uniform was singed and drenched, and his eyebrows had been sufficiently burnt off.

“Don’t ever fucking talk to her like that,” Tate seethed.

Colt strode over, bent down next to Kevin, and smiled. “I don’t care about the academy regulations or even my standing in society. Don’t mess with Primrose. Or I’ll burn you alive.”

Kevin scrambled backward like he was doing the crab and struggled to his feet. “Fuck this. I’m out, Caryn.”

He turned and left without another word.

Colt chuckled darkly and leaned back on his heels before standing back up.

“I just have to do everything myself then!” Caryn threw her hands up and narrowed her gaze at me. “I don’t know what game you’re playing at, but Tate is—”

“None of your concern,” I finished for her.

“Move on, lady,” a familiar voice snarked as Liza, Cyrus’s sister, stepped beside me. She wore a jersey, too, but it had the number eight plastered on the front with a name I didn’t recognize on the back. Her silver hair was tied into a sleek pony, and her blue eyes were burning with irritation. “I’ve been eavesdropping, and you really need to back off.”

“And who are you?” Caryn asked, mustering up way too much attitude. “This isn’t any of your business.”

“I’m Liza, Cyrus Rowe’s sister, and Primrose is my new friend,” she said, crossing her arms and glaring at her. “It doesn’t actually matter who I am, though, because you don’t need to hang around anymore.”

Caryn’s lips pursed, but she didn’t reply.

“This isn’t your—” Dana started, but Chelsea elbowed her and nodded toward Caryn, who just turned on her heels and walked away.

Thankfully, Dana got the message, and Caryn and her group seemed to leave the game early.

“So you’re Professor Rowe’s sister?” Colt came back over with a sly smile as the bystanders seemed to look away or go about their own business instead of ours. “Do you think he’d join our little family?”

“Family,” Tate snorted, raking a hand through his sweaty hair. “He means our girlfriend’s harem.”

“*Reverse* harem,” she corrected with a smirk.

Unfiltered glee surged through me as I bounced on my toes and produced a squeal. “Oh my gods! You get it!”

Tate moved over a bit to Colt and gave Liza and I space to grab each other’s forearms and hop up and down in excitement.

“Of course I do!” she scoffed happily, pointing to the field as we stopped jumping. “Joey’s my boyfriend. He’s number eight.”

“Joey’s cool.” Tate nodded his approval.

“And Hal is my other boyfriend. He’s actually back at my dorm because he had a migraine, but he’s Cyrus’s best friend, and he works at the library,” she whispered scandalously. “Both of their heart-o-meters are maxed out.”

“Oh my gosh.” Colt fist-pumped the air. “You and our girl are going to get along great.”

“I know.” She nodded smugly, glancing back at Cyrus, who was staring over at us. “Listen, Primrose, I like you. I knew it from the moment that I saw Cyrus look at you.”

“I’ve never really had a friend before.” I breathed out an easy laugh as my excitement bubbled over at the prospect of actually having a friend.

My boyfriends wore matching frowns, but Liza just grinned wickedly.

“Same here!” she cheered happily.

Joey, her boyfriend, jogged up to us, and he had the most unique combination of red hair and purple eyes. He never took his eyes off of her. “Hey, pretty girl.”

Joey tugged Liza into a hug and kissed her deeply.

My eyes found Colt’s at the use of her nickname, and butterflies erupted.

“Yep, it’s meant to be.” Colt sighed dreamily as they broke their kiss. “I call Primrose pretty girl, too.”

“Sick!” Joey grinned, slapping Colt’s hand in some weird greeting then doing the same to Tate’s. “Our girls are friends?”

Badass! Love that you took after me and shared her with your best friend.”

“Hal wasn’t your best friend to start with,” Liza teased him.

“Eh.” He shrugged, pressing a kiss to her head. “He grew on me.”

We all talked some more before halftime ended and Tate and Joey headed back to the field.

Liza ditched her brother by blowing him a kiss and sat on one side of me, and Colt sat on my other side.

Excitement about having a female friend aside from Leaf filled me. Not that Leaf wasn’t enough, because her sassy self rocked, but it was nice to have someone a bit more understanding and less judgmental about my harem-building.

“So, you and Cyrus?” She bumped my shoulder.

Colt leaned over and smirked. “Yeah, pretty girl. You and Cyrus? What’s this about? Were you able to talk with him about everything?”

“No.” I threaded my fingers through my hair with a groan. “I mean, we were, but then...”

“I interrupted?” A look of horror flashed across Liza’s face. “Oh, I’m so sorry!”

“It’s fine.” I waved my hand back and forth as I watched Tate douse another flame ball and paused the conversation to cheer him on. “Go, Tate!”

“You know...” Liza elbowed my arm. “Cyrus may be a professor, but you dating him isn’t against the rules or anything.”

“No, but it *is* frowned upon,” Colt added. “Not that I care or anything. Just figured I’d mention it.”

“All I care about is getting Cyrus to understand what I want.” My chest ached as I glanced back toward him.

He sat with a few of the other professors, Colt’s mom included. She noticed me before he did, and she waved with a

bright smile. Cyrus acted like he didn't see me.

I waved back to her and turned around with a frown.

“He understands my relationship with Joey and Hal,” Liza leveled with me, resting her elbows on her thighs. “He'll understand yours.”

“How can you be so sure?” I sulked, but Colt wrapped his arm around me and tugged me to his side.

“It'll work out, pretty girl. Let's watch Tate kick some ass.”

“Joey, too!” Liza added before we all erupted into a cheer as Joey and Tate came together and soaked an opposing team member, washing away the earth ball.

Joey played water just like Tate, and now that I knew who Joey was, it looked like he and Tate were actually good friends.

MANA Sim Academy was winning by a landslide, and with five seconds left on the clock, Tate had jumped over a couple of wind users and slid all the way over to the last fire user on their team, scoring another point before the ending bell rang out through the air.

“MANA Sim Academy wins!”

Everyone shouted and hollered in excitement.

Colt, Liza, and I screamed Tate and Joey's names in support. I knew my throat would be sore in the morning from all the shouting.

Tate and Joey slapped each other's hands before sprinting over toward us, clearing the wooden gate and landing on the bleachers with a loud creaking bang as their shoes smacked against the wooden floors.

“Joey! Tate! Get back here!” their coach shouted, but there wasn't real irritation in his tone since they had won.

Joey swooped in to kiss Liza, and it was adorable. But my focus was more on *my* boyfriend.

I flung myself into his outstretched arms without a second thought.

He lifted me off the ground and spun us around as his lips crushed against mine in a powerful, claiming kiss. His lips stole my breath, and my feet carefully landed back on the floor as he pulled back with the biggest grin. “You’re beautiful.”

“You did amazing!” I giggled as he spun us around again.

“Had to show off for you!” He set me down again, and I kept my arms around his neck since I stumbled over my own feet from the dizziness.

I could feel a burning stare on me, and I gulped as I glanced around and saw Cyrus’s head turned from me, his jaw tight. I kept scanning the crowd before landing my gaze on Al’s.

His expression was one of surprise, but that was all I could see before he got up and left without another glance back.

“Oh no.” My heart clenched.

I needed to freaking explain myself to all of them.

“What’s wrong, pretty girl?” Colt asked as I unwound from Tate.

“Al just ran off, and Cyrus won’t even spare me a glance,” I mumbled in self-pity.

I did it to myself. I should’ve talked to them before now.

I attempted to push down the sinking feeling in my gut as I focused on the men that had already accepted me. “But that’s something I’ll deal with later. I’m so proud of you!” I gushed at Tate.

“So you’re sleeping in our dorm room tonight, right?” Colt asked with wiggling eyebrows.

“My bed, though, sorry, man,” Tate teased.

“Nice try.” I grinned. “But I’m sleeping in my dorm tonight.”

“Oh, come on,” they pouted.

My heart swelled from their playfulness, and it took a lot of self-control not to give in and just stay in their dorms. But I wanted to figure things out with the rest of the guys before staying the night with them. Just so I could clear myself of any lingering guilt. I needed to let the rest of the guys know what I wanted.

But there was an odd fuzzy feeling in the back of my mind that was making me feel like I didn't deserve this. I just couldn't pinpoint where the negativity was coming from, and when I focused too hard on it, it went away.

ALDERIDGE

I couldn't stop staring at the message Prim had sent me last night.

PRIM

I know you saw me kiss Tate and maybe Colt at the game last night. What I have with them doesn't take away what I have with you. I still would love to go on our date and explain things a bit more. I'll be waiting for you to pick me up for dinner tonight at my dorm. If you don't show or text back and cancel...I understand. But I won't give up trying. I like you, Al."

A whirlwind of emotions flooded me, and I didn't get much sleep once I'd read that.

I didn't know how to feel about Primrose. I knew that I liked her. I felt things for that woman in a way I'd never felt for anyone. I didn't have much time for dating growing up, and the academy had been no exception. At least, until I met her.

Watching her flirt with Colt during the game and kiss Tate afterward was difficult, and it was like I was watching a nightmare on replay. I couldn't look away.

Jealousy ate at my chest until my heart felt rotten, and waking up this morning was no exception.

My entire day leading up to the time I'd planned on picking Prim up for the date was a blur. I was on autopilot,

meeting after meeting and checking out paperwork that the council did on my behalf to make sure it was done correctly.

I didn't bother texting her back. I already knew I was going to go on the date with her because I needed answers. What was it that she wanted from me when she was with Colt and Tate?

Sucking in a sharp breath, my fist came down to knock twice on her dorm room door.

She opened it a few seconds later, and my heart skipped a beat at how beautiful she looked. Her butterscotch-colored hair tumbled down her back in waves, and a soft-looking brown dress clung to her body. Her green eyes were wide with surprise, excitement, and nerves.

"You came," she breathed, her lips quirking into a soft smile.

"I wanted to see where this leads us," I replied honestly, adjusting the collar of my shirt.

She didn't say much else as she grabbed her purse and headed out with me.

The walk out of the dorms and to my car had been mostly small talk about the weather, but the drive to the local restaurant had been stark silent.

She sat in my passenger seat and played with a lock of her hair as she looked out the window as if she were entranced with the outside world.

I parked in front of the restaurant and pulled the keys from the ignition. With a huff of breath, I took my seatbelt off.

"Just give me a second," I mumbled, finding the handle and pulling it. I got out and walked around to her side to open the door for her.

"Oh." She fumbled with her seatbelt and slid out of the car with a grateful smile. "Thanks, Al."

My heart swelled with something warm and fuzzy before I tried to push it down. I needed to hear what she had to say

before I got my feelings involved, even though I was already involved more than I'd thought.

We entered the restaurant and got seated by the hostess in a secluded corner in a booth. She sat on one side, and I sat on the other.

"This is nice." She glanced around the place.

I shrugged, trying to act unbothered as my heart pounded painfully in my chest. "It's a hole in the wall, really. But the food is great even though nobody comes here."

"What're you ordering?" She picked up a menu and scanned it. "The spicy chicken tacos sound good."

"I usually order the steak, so I'm not sure." I flicked the corner of the menu.

Nervous energy surged through me. I knew how to act in almost every situation, but I was clueless how to navigate this.

The waitress came over, and she took our drink and food orders with a pleasant smile.

We still didn't say anything else until our drinks arrived, and she grabbed it hesitantly before taking a few sips.

"What's your relationship status?" I blurted the main question that had been gnawing at me.

She swallowed her last sip as a gulp and launched herself into a coughing fit, setting the cup down with a thump and wheezing in a breath. "Goodness." She slapped her hand over her chest and inhaled. "I'm dating three men, but I'm interested in six."

"*Six?*"

"You're one of them, obviously." She scratched her cheek with her index finger as her gaze went kind of wild like she really didn't know what to say or how to explain it. "I'm dating Colt, Tate, and Raiden. I'm also interested in you, Cyrus, and Wells."

I reached for my drink and took a few gulps. But even with my throat wet, my voice came out strained. "So you want all

of us? How do you think that's going to work, Prim?"

Her lips pressed together in a slight grimace as she wrinkled her cute nose. "It sounds bad, doesn't it?"

The question was rhetorical, but her voice was so soft that I felt compelled to answer it.

"It doesn't sound like a dream relationship," I murmured, clenching my fist until the knuckles turned white.

My uncle, or rather my dad's brother, shared a wife with two other men. It wasn't unheard of, but it *was* an alternative lifestyle. I knew more than I wanted to know. My uncle had been disowned, and according to my father, it was because he was a miserable man. Suffering from depression that he'd only suffered from after marrying that woman he shared with two other men.

It was sad.

I never understood why they disowned him instead of helping him, but I assumed it was fear of scrutiny.

"And Cyrus Rowe? Our professor?" I pressed.

"It's different, I admit that. But that doesn't make it any less special," she reiterated. "Um, and yes, but I haven't been able to talk to him about the dynamics of my relationships."

The truth was there, but I also knew my time for relationships was limited. Far more limited than many others with the student council, my academics, family obligations, and other research.

Was it fair to request her to only have me when I was only around a quarter of the time? The idea that she'd be taken care of when I wasn't there was appealing, but that was probably what my uncle thought, too. Was it worth the societal ridicule?

Cyrus's sister, Liza, had become the talk of not only the academy but the upper social circles, too. All because she was dating two men, and her boyfriends were dealing with the same thing.

Didn't Prim realize it would be the same for us?

My family worked incredibly hard to get where they were, and it was at the expense of happiness. My parents' happiness and mine. Every waking hour was dedicated to something productive.

Creating and overseeing Magic Company had been a feat no regular person could've done. Ensuring more magical developments with technology would always be their goal, and it was what I continued to research. Their sacrifices were great, and so were mine as the heir.

They would see this *relationship* as a stain against their success.

They'd already disowned my uncle.

Father told him he would welcome him back when he came to his senses. I never understood why he didn't take him up on the offer if he was miserable anyway.

"Dynamics?" I thrust my fingers through my hair with a groan. "Prim, you're essentially asking me to share you with five other men."

"I am." She nodded, glancing at her lap. Understanding, disappointment, and grief had been clear in her expression, and she knew it. It was why she wouldn't look me in the eye. "I have feelings for all of you, and I don't want to choose between you."

"How would it even work?" I asked as the waitress came back and set our food in front of us. She double-checked that we were good before leaving to serve another table.

"I would just date each of you." She grabbed her taco and bit into it, the shell crunching as she chewed. "I wouldn't ever add to the group. You six would be it for me, and while it's completely selfish, I think I would lose my mind with jealousy seeing you with any other girl but me."

"That's a double standard." I cut into my steak and took a bite.

My mind ran rampant with my thoughts.

“It is,” she admitted with a frown, pain glaringly obvious on her expression. “I’m sorry for that. If you aren’t interested, I’d at least like to finish this date out as friends.”

Friends.

That didn’t sit well with me, either.

There was a roaring in my ears as I took the first bite of the tender cut of steak, but the satisfaction I usually felt from the flavorful slice of meat didn’t swell inside of me. Instead, it was a hollow ache.

“I don’t want to be friends.” I set my fork down with a heavy sigh. “I want something more with you, but sharing isn’t exactly normal here.”

“Liza is dating two people,” she mumbled before crunching into her taco.

“Yeah, *two* not six.” I winced, hoping that she understood. “Besides, she’s ridiculed because of that.”

“Then those people suck.” Prim shrugged as if she really didn’t care about anyone else’s opinions.

“Those people are also my parents. I don’t have anything against that lifestyle, but it’s not the norm,” I admitted. “My parents are high profile people in our society, and their opinions hold a lot of weight. That also means that what I do as their only son holds stock.”

“And being in a relationship with me would make you look bad.” She straightened her spine and wiped her mouth with her napkin before tossing it on the table. “I’m sorry for even considering adding in someone who cares more about other’s opinions than their own wants.”

“Don’t!” I reached my hand out for her without even thinking before curling my fingers into a fist. “Don’t go,” I pleaded.

“Why not?” She hesitated, shaking her head. “It’s not like you’re going to change your mind. It must’ve just been wishful thinking wanting you to do this. It’s one thing to not want to for you, but to just judge the lifestyle and care about

the opinions of others? I won't compromise my wants. You won't compromise yours. I'm already with three men who care about me the way I care about them. I won't downplay that. I really did like you, Al."

I was screwing this up royally.

Her heart-o-meter flickered from five hearts to four.

"Prim, please don't." My voice cracked as panic clawed at my throat.

She skewered me with an unflinching look. "I'm not doing anything, Al. If you want to be friends, we can be. I'm just disappointed we can't be more."

"It's not you, it's—"

"Gods." She scoffed, standing up and slapping her palms against the table. "It's not you, it's me? Get a better line than that. I can't believe this."

"I *do* like you, Prim." My voice was low, shame clogging my throat. "In a different world, I wouldn't mind sharing you with the others. It's not my wants that's stopping me."

My parents were so vocal about their disapproval of both my uncle and Liza's relationship dynamics. They would disown me, too. And disowning me meant that I'd lose everything.

I became the mold my parents created for me. Without them and their backing, I wouldn't have access to my trust fund or my role in the business that I've trained for. I was already working at the company as a researcher, and if they disapproved of me, I'd lose that position as well.

I didn't know Prim well enough to gamble losing that, but why did it feel like my chest was being ripped out by not agreeing to try?

She let out a bitter chuckle. "That's the problem, Al. You're letting your parents dictate your life on something you don't even know if they'd be upset about because you haven't run it by them."

“You don’t *know* them.” I stood up as well. “They aren’t the type to run something like this by, and they’ve been very vocal about Liza’s relationship simply because she attends our academy. Whether you like it or not, people talk. People have opinions.”

“I don’t care about their opinions.” She pulled her purse up and rifled through it before throwing a few bills on the table. “I care about my own happiness, and my boyfriends make me happy. I thought you would make me happy, too.”

She turned on her heel and strode out of the restaurant, phone pressed to her ear.

By the time I’d paid my part of our meal and rushed outside to find her, she was gone.

I yanked my phone out and sent a frantic text as I walked back and forth on the sidewalk.

ALDERIDGE

Can you let me know someone picked you up and that you’re safe?

For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I didn’t want it to turn out this way. Not with you.

Please just let me know you’re safe.

FINALLY, SHE REPLIED.

PRIM

Colt picked me up. I’m safe.

THE TEXT SENT A WAVE OF RELIEF THROUGH ME BUT ALSO seemingly sucker-punched me in the gut.

What the hell did I just do?

PRIMROSE

Somehow an entire month had come and gone, and my frustrations in certain aspects of my love life were bubbling over.

But not all aspects.

Colt, Tate, and Raiden had been perfect. They were everything I could've asked for and more.

Colt had been begging me to stay the night at his dorm, but I still felt weird about it because I hadn't established things with all of my love interests. He was practically glued to my side, and I knew he'd do anything to make me comfortable. It would be fine to stay with him, but there was a sinking feeling in my gut that made me feel guilty.

Tate was on the same page as Colt, and when he wasn't at MANA ball practice, he was with us. He'd been adamant about me staying over as well. If I didn't figure things out with the rest of the guys soon, they'd kidnap me. I was sure of it.

Raiden hung out with us a lot, and he knew I was upset about the other guys. He knew how to comfort me. With Raiden, I didn't have to say much of anything for him to get it. He understood me more than I seemed to understand myself.

While our relationships had been wonderful, they hadn't progressed much from what they had been. I knew it was my own fault. I'd been feeling so much guilt about the others so I couldn't fully throw myself into my boyfriends. It was stupid, I knew that. But I couldn't help feeling that way.

Al's date had hurt me immensely.

Everything he said was a cookie cutter answer. He spoke like a freaking politician. If he himself didn't mind sharing me in a relationship with the others, then that was what mattered. If he didn't want to be involved with me and our dynamics, it would've hurt me less. I hated that he wouldn't even entertain the idea because of others—because of his parents. I knew that he was worried about being shunned from his family, but wasn't love worth every sacrifice?

I hadn't even heard back from Al since I'd texted him that I was safe with Colt. And the last time I'd seen him was when he was in the hallway, but I only caught a glimpse of his orange hair before he disappeared.

That stung, obviously.

Cyrus had also apparently decided to ignore me, which sucked. He knew what I wanted, at least I think he did. I wouldn't know unless he let me tell him—talk to him. But he even tucked-tail and ran from his own classroom after lectures these days to avoid me. I'd been hanging out with Liza a lot, but she promised she would let me talk to him so she would try not to interfere. Though, I loved that she wanted to on my behalf.

Wells had become like a prisoner on the run, and I was the detective trying to catch him. The moment I took the slightest step toward him, he ran. I'd been debating texting him, but this was something we needed to talk about in person. The problem was, I couldn't even catch him in class.

My harem being in jeopardy upset me, but I wasn't angry. Not like I would have been when I thought this was a dream or a game.

I was *sad*. I was sad that I was missing out on Cyrus and Wells...even Al.

My past life had become nothing but a fleeting dream. I barely remembered the fact that I even had one. It was the oddest thing.

Leaf told me that it was for the best, and I believed her.

This was my life now, and I wanted to fully immerse myself in it.

Today was the first Saturday since coming here that I had no plans. Colt had lunch with his mom, and I was invited again but declined out of sheer anxiety. They had errands to run after, so they'd be gone the whole day. Tate had MANA ball practice, and there wasn't a game tonight so his coach would have him practicing all day. Raiden had mentioned that he had something to do for class today, so I wasn't able to spend the day with him either.

Instead, I opted for the morning with Leaf and Liza.

It had been fun, but the time for Liza to leave for lunch with her brother came quicker than I would've liked.

"Are you sure you don't wanna come?" She pouted her bottom lip out as she grabbed her bag and stood by the door. "Hal will be there."

Hal had jumped ship to the "Primrose and Cyrus" after we'd met, and I had to admit that it was great to have Cyrus's best friend cheering me on.

Though, it didn't seem to have much of an effect on him.

Cyrus still refused to have the conversation with me. I didn't want to push, so it was better to decline the lunch.

"You should go," Leaf piped up from where she'd conjured a water mist to soak her leafy body on her bed.

I rolled my eyes. I'd told her time and time again to do that in the bathroom because the mist always settled on the slick floor, and my ass had met the marble way too many times because of it.

"As much as I appreciate Hal, I don't want to force Cyrus into spending time with me." I pouted before grabbing my bag and meeting Liza at the door. "Besides, I'm going to see if I can track down Wells and corner him into letting me explain everything."

Leaf sighed dramatically. "Your choice, but I think you're choosing wrong."

“I’m not choosing at all.” I planted my hand on my hip and hit her with a look. “Cyrus has made his desire for space clear. Wells hasn’t said a word to me since he found out I was dating Colt and Tate. I’m just going where I need to.”

“She’s got a point,” Liza said.

“I’m surrounded by babies.” Leaf stuck her tongue out, and a bee flew out. “Oops.”

Liza’s eyes widened, but before she could say anything, I elbowed her.

Leaf’s diet was that of certain insects and sunlight. I didn’t judge, but she felt a bit insecure when the insects got out of her.

Liza snapped her mouth shut, which was definitely for her own good.

When Leaf got insecure she got mean...meaner than usual.

“Got something to say?” Leaf’s eyes flashed with an underlying warning.

Liza shook her head quickly. “Nope. Nothing.”

“Well, we’ll see you later!” I hollered to Leaf, grabbing Liza’s arm and safely getting us out of there.

We strode down the hallway with our arms locked, laughing.

“Oh my gods, I thought I was dead!” Liza howled as we stepped outside.

“Dude, the first time I ever asked her about it, I got a vine around my mouth! I had to chew through it!” Tears rolled down my cheeks from laughing, but as I noticed Hal waiting on Liza, I saw Cyrus.

My back straightened, sobering me up almost immediately.

“Leaf’s the best,” she giggled, glancing to where her boyfriend and brother stood. “You sure you don’t want to come?”

I shook my head, my gaze not leaving Cyrus's. "I don't want to intrude."

"But you know Hal and I would love for you to join." She groaned. "Cyrus does, too. He just doesn't know it yet."

"Well, until he does, count me out." I forced my gaze from Cyrus's and met Liza's. "See you later?"

"Of course." She threw her arms around me and whispered in my ear, "My brother's just being an idiot. Give him time."

"Time has been given," I whispered back before we pulled away and went our separate ways.

I went directly to the one place I'd been avoiding.

The art room that Wells had holed up in.

I didn't want to corner him in his own sanctuary. I didn't think that was fair to him, but he'd forced my hand at this point. If he didn't like what I had to say, then I'd leave him alone. But I had to know. I had to lay it all out on the table for him. Losing him wasn't an option for me. Not until I tried everything I could.

Besides, I still had the sketch he'd dropped of me burning a hole in my bag.

There was classical piano music muffled by the door, and I could hear the hum of an air conditioning unit.

I adjusted the bag on my shoulder and pushed the door open to be met with the smells of paint, solvents, and paint thinner slamming into my senses.

Wells hadn't noticed the door open as he hummed along with the classical tunes, casting fire magic in a torrent over the easel of paints smattered over the canvas.

I couldn't help but watch as the fire burnt a beautiful profile portrait that looked awfully familiar. It was the same one as the sketch in my bag—of *me*.

My hand slipped on the edge of the door, and it shut with a loud bang.

Wells jumped, searing fire magic toward the wall where there was shelving full of color-coded paint tubes. The tubes combusted under the heat, and paint splattered everywhere.

“Oh, *noodles!*” My hands flew over my mouth as I gasped.

The fire stopped coming from his palm as he turned toward the door, and his expression was one of confusion before it went blank. “*Primrose...*”

HEART EVENT TRIGGERED flashed above his heart-o-meter that still held two hearts.

I swallowed the hard lump in my throat. “I’m so sorry for startling you! I just got a bit mesmerized with watching you work.”

His tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip. “What’re you doing in here? The room is reserved.”

“I know.” I reached back and scratched the back of my head before delving into my bag to retrieve the sketch. “I just...I’ve been wanting to give this back.” I held out the sketch of myself to him, walking the distance from the door to his easel.

He grabbed it with shaky hands and stared down at it. “Thanks.”

My hand fell back to my side. “Listen, Wells...”

“You can leave now.” He turned abruptly and set the sketch among scattered emptied pudding cups that had been discarded on a tabletop next to the easel.

A few more sketches had been tossed there, all of me. Different poses, different expressions, but each one was of *me*.

“I don’t want to.” My voice was strained, pleading. “I just want to explain my relationships to you.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” He took a shaky breath as he stared at the canvas. “Ignite,” he rasped, and the canvas went up in flames, swirling and dicing until the full line art of the subject stood out against the background.

His style was realism, but he took it to another level.

“I owe you an explanation, and I’m going to lay it all out on the table for you.” I wiped my clammy palms on my legs. “I’m interested in six men. Colt, Tate, and Raiden you probably know about. Al, Cyrus, and *you* are also men I have feelings for.”

He grabbed his pallet with other colors along with a paintbrush. “Is that so?” The paintbrush clinked against the jar filled with water as he rinsed the brush and there was a scratchy sound as he dried the brush on a paper towel. “So you’re pursuing all of us?”

“That’s correct.” I nodded even though he wasn’t looking at me.

He dipped the brush into a skin tone color and spread the paint on the canvas where there was skin. “Would you accept anyone else? Would the number of men ever increase, I mean?”

“No.” I shook my head thinking of the men I wanted. “You six will always be it.”

“Six men...” he sighed, rinsing the brush and drying it again before dipping it into a blush color and blending it with the skin color. “That’s...more than usual.”

“I know,” I said softly, glancing down. “But it doesn’t change how I feel.”

He hummed, continuing to move the brush over the art and picking new colors, blending until the painting became...*me*.

“What got you into painting?” I asked, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction to see if we were truly compatible. Though, I knew if we weren’t, the heart-o-meter wouldn’t be above his head.

“My mother.” He placed the brushes down in the jar of water and sighed, running a hand over his face. “She painted landscapes, and her art has been in art shows across the world. My father’s a researcher...he discouraged it. They get along fine now that they’re divorced, but it took a long time to get to that point.”

“I’m glad you inherited her love for art. Yours is truly perfect. I’m sorry your father doesn’t understand. It’s a loss for him, not you.”

He shrugged, tilting his head as he stared at the painting. “At least he agrees that this academy is good for me. It’s the elitism for him, I’m sure. But it doesn’t really matter.”

“It matters,” I pressed, stepping next to him. I itched to grab his hand but stopped myself. Wells reminded me of a skittish rabbit, like how Cotton should’ve been. “What you want to do matters.”

“I want to incorporate magic into classic art. Fire can be the best medium when working. It evolves regular art into something...*more*.” He held his arm out and backed away, bumping his arm against my chest as he moved us backward. “Ignite,” he mumbled, and the paint he’d just smeared on the canvas went up in flames for a few seconds before he dispelled it.

Smoke cleared, and what was left was a beautifully burnt paint look that somehow made the realism style he had before *more*. It was almost as if he’d taken a picture and plastered a grainy filter on it.

“This is breathtaking.” My fingertips touched my lips as I examined it. Watching him work was the most mesmerizing thing I’d seen, and to see the final product was more than I could’ve asked for. “Why me?”

“You’ve ruined portraits for me,” he rasped, rubbing the nape of his neck. “I’m infatuated with your beauty.”

My heart thumped like a gallop in my chest as he leaned forward, studying every feature of my face with rapt attention. “I didn’t think you liked me.”

He let out a bitter chuckle. “How could I not like you? You haunt every vision I have artistically. From the first moment I saw you, I’ve been stuck on you.”

“I feel the same.” My breath came out choppy as he stepped into my space, brushing his nose against mine.

“Even with the others?” His voice was strained. “How can you care deeply about so many people? How does it not vary?”

“It doesn’t. I don’t know how to explain it, but it’s like looking at the night sky. Each star is beautiful, unique. My feelings for the six of you are the same. It doesn’t make my interest for you less or more. I care about each of you. I don’t measure that.”

He hummed again, eyes flicking to my lips. His heart-o-meter increased one full heart to make three out of five filled. “Be with me, too.”

My feelings for him took over, and I jumped into his arms, winding my arms around his neck and pulling his lips to mine.




His fingers delved into my hair, angling my head as he took charge of the kiss. His kiss was tender and careful, like he was scared he’d mess something up. I loved it.

We pulled apart and rested our foreheads against each other’s, breathing raggedly.

“You’re perfect,” he whispered.

“And you’re mine,” I mumbled before claiming his lips again.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 
COLT: 
CYRUS: 
RAIDEN: 
TATE: 
WELLS: 

ALDERIDGE

“Alderidge?” A masculine voice jolted me from my obsessive thoughts of Prim.

One thing I knew the moment Prim had left our date was that I’d screwed up.

The pit in my gut had grown exponentially. So much so, I’d tracked down Uncle Arthur with every spare moment I had, which wasn’t much. My parents didn’t keep any records, and my grandparents passed a long time ago, so finding him had been difficult. It wasn’t something I could delegate, either. Doing so would have alerted my parents, and I knew they wouldn’t have wanted me to speak with him.

They loathed the man.

But I finally found him, after an entire month of searching. I had located him in a town a few miles away from the academy. I reached out and asked him to meet me, for the first time, at a coffee shop near campus.

He wore a brown suit, and his hair was as orange as mine. I’d always wondered who I got my hair color from. His was longer than mine, straight and worn down. But he had the same bright blue eyes as my father. That was the only similarity between them.

He didn’t look depressed, though. He looked happy.

“That’s me.” I stood and reached my hand out to him. “And you’re Arthur.”

“That’s me.” His brows raised, but he hesitantly shook my hand before pulling back. “You’re Jack’s kid.”

“I am.” I nodded. “And you’re my uncle.”

He let out a strained breath as he sat down across from my seat. “Not since Jack and our parents disowned me.”

“Yeah... Thanks for meeting me here,” I rasped, rubbing my hands over my face as I sat back down.

Him agreeing had been a surprise. My parents talked so badly of him I was sure he’d want nothing to do with their child, but he had been open to meeting me.

“What’s this about?” He crossed his arms, his gaze holding nothing but distrust.

I let out a shaky breath. “It’s no secret that my parents hate you and your wife.”

“And my two brother-husbands.” He quirked his lips into an amused smirk. “No surprise he left that part out.”

“He didn’t.” I swallowed a lump in my throat.

“Bet he left out the fact that he was my brother-husband at one point, too.” Arthur raised his hand toward the waitress, beckoning her over to order us both a coffee.

I cocked an eyebrow as surprise washed over me, and the waitress left with his order for us. “He *what?*”

“Renee was a woman we shared with two other men. She had four of us. Now, she has three,” Arthur explained, flashing his wedding ring. “Your father broke her heart when he chose Kelsey over her.”

“*Chose* my mom?” My brows furrowed as the waitress dropped off the cups of coffee. “I was told they had been childhood friends and fell in love. They only had eyes for each other.”

“They *were* childhood friends,” Arthur agreed. “But your dad only saw Kelsey as a friend. Their heart-o-meter is at a one, I think. But he and Renee had five hearts, just like the rest of us had with her. He couldn’t handle the fact that she was in

love with three others. He hated sharing her attention. He began to hate us, even me, his own brother. Renee was so hurt by it.” His eyes flashed with pain as he shook his head.

“How long was he a part of your relationship?” I grabbed the coffee and took a swig.

It had no cream and was bitter, but it was something.

“Two years.”

I choked, sputtering and coughing as I tried to suck in a breath. “*What?*”

“Kelsey was his best friend, still. Even though Renee never liked her. She knew Kelsey was in love with Jack, but Jack always told her she didn’t have to worry about her. Kelsey took advantage of Jack’s jealousy and told him he wouldn’t have to share her if he chose her. He would be it for Kelsey, and Renee loved all of us. So, he broke things off with Renee and disowned me to marry Kelsey. Our parents accepted him back into the family since he left our relationship, which they deemed a disgrace. I knew Jack had a son with her, but I was never allowed to meet you.”

A sudden coldness hit my core, spreading through my gut. “He...was part of your relationship?”

“Yes, and he broke the heart of the woman I love when he left. Renee still hurts when he’s mentioned. I told her I was coming to meet you, and the other two had to comfort her because the thought of you being Jack’s but not hers was painful.” He squeezed his eyes tightly before opening them with a sharp stare. “Renee didn’t want kids, and Jack had said the same thing. None of us really wanted kids. Nothing against them, but it wasn’t right for us.”

I nodded, staring down at the lid of the coffee cup. A few stray droplets of coffee lingered on the slot where I’d taken a drink.

My parents knew all about this, and my mom was so disgusted by the idea of one woman and more men. My dad was always just angry about it. I mean, I guess I understood that a little bit more now.

“That’s what you wanted, right?” He cleared his throat before gulping down the drink and slamming it on the table. “Intel on your old man?”

“No. I—” My voice cracked. “I’ve fallen for a woman... but she has feelings for five other men besides myself. My father had told me how disgraceful you were for being in love with a woman who loved three men, and he told me how depressed and miserable it made you.”

His jaw slackened before he rubbed it. “Oh.”

“She asked me if I would be okay with it...with sharing her...but I couldn’t give her a straight answer.” I dropped my head into my hands. “She left, and I haven’t heard from her since. That was a month ago.”

“And why did you need to speak with me?”

“Because I needed to talk to someone who has been in a similar situation. You’ve been outcasted from the family... from society.”

“Hold on.” His voice was stern, and I glanced up. “I wasn’t cast out from society. None of us were. Only by my family. The world is more open to this than you’d think. And I’m not depressed. I’m deeply in love with Renee, as are the other two. We love that she’s always taken care of by one of us. This life isn’t for everyone, sure, but it’s not bad. I wouldn’t trade Renee for the world, and I happily share her.”

“Don’t you get...jealous?” The word was bitter on my tongue, much more bitter than the coffee.

He chuckled but shook his head. “No. I don’t.” His expression softened. “None of us do. All we care about is her happiness. And we all make her happy. Seeing her grieve the relationship she had with Jack proved to all of us how much we just want her happy even if it means sharing her affections. Plus, we’re all best friends anyway. It’s the best life to be able to live with all of the ones I love.”

“But *six* men?” I chewed on my cheek. Was it bad that the number didn’t bother me? Wasn’t it supposed to?

“That’s not too many,” he stated without hesitation. “Did she say she planned on more?”

“She was adamant it was *only* the six of us.”

“So what is it you want me to say, boy?” Arthur steepled his fingers in front of him and tapped the tips against his lips. “Deciding to date her means you’d be okay with the other men. Don’t be like your father and break her heart. If you can’t commit to her loving more men than you, then do her a favor and bow out now.”

“But I can’t stop *thinking* about her.” I drew in a harsh breath before letting it out steadily. Longing made my heart ache. “Gods, she’s perfect in every way for me. But my parents—”

“Respectfully, screw your parents. Screw anyone else’s opinions.” He dropped his arms down to point at me. “What do you want?”

“I want her,” I said in a soft tone. “That’s never been the problem.”

“Can you handle her with the other guys?” he asked. “Will you let your jealousy turn you as rotten as your father did? Hurt everyone else and leave her?”

“I can handle them,” I answered, screwing my eyes shut with another deep breath before opening them again. “I wouldn’t hurt her or leave her. I’ve really messed up.”

“Good,” he barked out with a chuckle. “You aren’t anything like Jack, are ya?”

“I’ve been told my whole life I’m just like him.” I frowned.

“Then get ready to disappoint him.” He flashed me a wicked grin. “Because you’re more like your uncle than your father.”

“I thought you *weren’t* my uncle,” I retorted. “Since the family disowned you and all.”

He shrugged. “That was before I knew I’d like you. Besides, they may disown you, too, and you’ll need family

after that. I didn't have any, and it made it a little harder."

"Thank you." I nodded my head toward him. "Would you mind if I kept in touch?"

"I expect you to now." He narrowed his gaze on me before chuckling. "I did not expect this conversation to end this way. Now, you go get that girl, and you treat her like a lady. You hear me?"

"Of course," I promised.

We talked about a few more things pertaining to his relationship and what I should expect. I felt better learning how I could navigate being with Prim while she was with the others, and I'd connected with a man I'd been told my whole life was terrible.

I left the restaurant with a smile on my face and pulled out my phone the moment I got into my car to call Prim. It went straight to voicemail.

"Prim, listen, I know I was a jerk...but I was wrong. Please, call me back," I pleaded before another call beeped in.

I ended the call with Prim's voicemail and answered my mother who was on the other line with dread in my gut.

"Yes?"

"Oh, Alderidge," she scolded her usual welcome when I answered the phone. "I told you time and time again that you must answer your phone more professionally. You're a Venturo, after all. Do not embarrass us like you already have."

"Excuse me?" Surprise rippled through me.

"First, address me correctly," she clipped.

"Hello, Mother," I sighed.

"No."

I squeezed my eyes shut and hit the corner of the phone on my head before pulling it back to my ear. "This is Alderidge Venturo. How may I be of help to you?"

“Better,” she snapped her praise like I was nothing but an irritation. “Why are you meeting with your father’s ingrate brother Arthur?”

Fear struck my heart, and I hesitated.

“Explain yourself, dear. Because your father and I are assuming the worst. Are you digging up your father’s past to blackmail him? You’re his heir. You’re the rightful CEO of Magic Company. You don’t need to blackmail him for that.”

“It’s not blackmail, Mother.” I frowned again. I enjoyed researching for Magic Company, but I never cared to be CEO. She knew that but chose to ignore it. “I just wanted to meet him and make my own opinion.”

She was silent for a beat. “And?”

“He’s nice.”

She huffed out a breath. “I’ve arranged your date for the Gala tomorrow evening. You’re to meet April at the venue and walk in with her. It’s a publicity thing, dear. Don’t argue. I don’t care about heart-o-meters. See you tomorrow. Goodbye, Alderidge.”

Click.

Lead filled my veins, and my heart pounded against my chest painfully fast.

What the actual hell, Mother?

I didn’t need to worry about the stupid Gala. I wanted Prim.

WELLS

“Are you sure you won’t be attending the Gala, darling?” Mom’s kind voice came through the phone on speaker as I used my fire magic to warp the background of the newest work of art I was creating. “Won’t your girlfriend be there?”

“With her other boyfriend, yes,” I told her, guiding the flames over the wet paint.

“Why can’t you go, too?”

“Raider’s dad doesn’t know about the arrangement yet,” I muttered as the flaming wet paint hit my nostrils, and I scrunched my nose. “They both invited me, though.”

She sighed dreamily. “I’m so happy you found someone to be your muse. Love is the best inspiration.”

“Who is your inspiration this week, Mom?” I joked with her, pulling my hand away and dispelling the flames.

“Oh, a couple of men from the neighboring town.” She laughed. “But I won’t bore you with the details.”

“Please don’t.” I shivered in disgust.

Mom was the best, but she was promiscuous. After she and Dad divorced, she’d really found herself. In her words, she loved men, but she never loved any one man.

I just didn’t think she found the right one yet. I hoped one day she would.

Dad had already remarried, and the woman who had become my stepmother was nice enough. She made him happy.

But Mom was happy with her situation for now.

“Any new projects for Agni Draco?” she asked.

“Nothing to present as of yet.” I strolled over to the mini-fridge and grabbed a chocolate pudding cup and a plastic spoon. “Everything I create is of Primrose. It’s like I can’t focus on anything else. Ever since I saw her watching me work.”

“Why is that a bad thing? If she’s your muse, use that.”

“Then my identity would be easily found out,” I pointed out, taking the lid off my cup and shoving a spoon into the chocolatey goodness. “Agni Draco is meant to be a ghost artist.”

“You can stay unidentified, darling. People are obsessed with the art, not necessarily the identity of the artist.”

“Says the famous painter,” I drawled, taking a bite and reveling in the chocolate taste.

“You’re famous, too.” She huffed a laugh. “And your fans haven’t been trying to figure your identity out.”

“I guess.” I swallowed the bite. “Have you talked to Tyler, Craig, or Patrick?”

“Not this week.” She groaned. “I did hear from your father. He said they’d be unreachable at some conference, so it was expected.”

My brothers were more logical and interested in research rather than art. I definitely took after Mom, but they took after Dad. We all loved each other, but we didn’t all have the same things in common. What family did, though?

“Ah, I didn’t know that.”

“When do I get to meet Primrose?” She changed the subject as I discarded the fully eaten pudding cup on the table.

“When do you want to?” I asked hesitantly.

“How about next weekend? I’ll be in town.”

“We will make it work, then.” I shuffled through my paints. “Dinner?”

“I was thinking of that little art studio off campus where you can drink wine and paint?”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair and glaring at the phone that sat on my stool next to the easel. “You’re not going to run off with the model this time?”

“No promises!” she giggled, and I heard the rustling of paper on the other end. “I’ll see you and your girlfriend next weekend. Bye, darling!”

“Bye, Mom.”

I heard the audible click of her hanging up and smiled.

She’d taken the news of my relationship with Primrose great, but she’d surprised me with how well she accepted her being in a committed relationship with multiple men.

Primrose would love her, and I couldn’t wait for them to meet.

Planting my hands on my hips, I stared at the easel smeared with paint that created Primrose’s lips.

They were a soft shade of pink and felt like velvet against mine.

I loved creating art with magic. All of the elements were fun to incorporate with different mediums, but my favorite was fire.

I wanted to create something different for my next reveal...something fun and new.

Agni Draco was the name I’d chosen for my artist alter ego, and it was perfect. Whenever I’d reveal new art, I wore a mask. I had designed the mask one night when I realized my art should be shared, but I didn’t want to rely on Mom’s name. I wanted to earn success on my own as an artist.

The mask went over my head like a sock cap, and it was black all over except for the face, which was ivory, painted as

a skull with flames coming out of the eyes, nose, and mouth.

People of all ages and classes loved my work, and I was proud of it. I worked with portraits, landscapes, and objects. Usually, it was painted canvas, but I dabbled in sculpting every now and then.

It had been a long time since I'd sculpted. The last time, it was of a man on his knees with his head in his hands screaming. Flames erupted around him before dousing out with water.

I'd been so excited when I found a way to make the magic continuous without wasting MANA. It also made the flames less dangerous since they no longer burned. It was all for show.

It was the last work I'd revealed, and it had been at least six months since then.

Before Primrose became my muse, I struggled with artist's block.

But now, my imagination was active again, and I needed to do something *bigger*.

I was only in Basics, but I'd read as many spell tomes as I could from the library that pertained to tangible magic. There was a spell that combined fire and wind magic to create smoke, and if I could've created a motion picture with it, maybe I could create a live painting from the smoke.

"Smoke stream," I incanted, calling on my MANA.

Puffs of smoke appeared in lumps as I moved my hands and manipulated the smoke into the start of a silhouette. Long wavy hair and a shorter stature came out, but before I could delve into the details, it faded.

Exhaustion crept into my bones as my MANA depleted.

I trudged over and collapsed on the sofa with a groan.

I needed to increase my MANA levels to be able to sculpt the smoke like I wanted to.

It was going to be a long few weeks with this as my goal, but I *had* to make this work.

Manipulating magic into art was what gave me my platform as an artist. It was revolutionary, but this would be the best yet.

PRIMROSE

My phone vibrated on the dresser for the tenth time this morning, and that wasn't counting the thirteen calls last night.

"Is he calling you *again*?" Tate asked from his spot on my bed next to Colt.

"Maybe you should hear him out, pretty girl." Colt flipped to his stomach as he watched me shimmy into the skin-tight black sleeveless dress with a sweetheart neckline Leaf had gotten me for the Gala.

Raiden scoffed, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. His eyes had been glued to me since he came over this morning, and there was a heated stare that made my knees weak. "Why should she? She opened up to him, and he turned her down. She doesn't owe him anything."

"Not saying she does, doberman." Colt rolled his eyes.

Tate burst out laughing as I pulled my hair out of my dress and fanned it out around me. "He *is not* a doberman. Much more of a black cat."

Raiden scowled.

Colt thinned his lips before glancing at Raiden. "Yeah, good point."

"His parents are strict," Wells mentioned from where he sat on my desk chair, staring at me like he was memorizing every feature. "He probably needed time to come to terms with this relationship. It's slightly unorthodox."

“They’re stuck up jerks, but they kiss my father’s ass since he’s their biggest sponsor. Magic Company has a few non-profits, but they’re mostly a for-profit organization.” Raiden frowned. “Yeah, I guess it makes sense that he’s nervous about his parents.”

“You like him, and he was your first meeting of your love interests,” Leaf scolded me sharply. “Answer his call, and wear this.”

My heart fluttered as she handed me a magical pendant that stayed sparkling like a diamond teardrop with sparkles. “This is beautiful.”

“It is.” She nodded. “I’m proud of you for chasing your dreams. Consider it a present.”

“I knew you liked me!” I squealed, clutching the necklace and hugging her. She was a lot more plant-like than I’d expected. Her green, leafy body crumpled slightly under the pressure of my hug. “Thank you!”

“Unhand me!” She pulled away with a shiver. “And you’re welcome, you brute.”

The guys chuckled.

“I’ll call Al after tonight. For now, I just want to enjoy myself.” I smiled at the guys. “But I wish all of you could come with me.”

“You can, you know,” Raiden added, rubbing his hands together as if it were a nervous tick.

“We’ll let you have her to yourself tonight,” Tate mused, winking at me.

“But not too much to yourself,” Colt added with a warning look. “You’ve already tasted her.”

“He can taste me any time,” I sighed dreamily.

“He has?” Wells tilted his head with a frown as he dropped his gaze down the length of me.

“I have,” Raiden answered with a smug smile. “She’s perfect, if you were wondering.”

“I’d rather not have to wonder.” Wells bit his bottom lip, and heat flooded me.

Colt hopped off the bed and picked me up in a bear hug. His scent enveloped me as I hugged him back. “I’ll miss you. You look stunning.”

“Thank you.” I pulled away. “I’ll miss all of you.”

“And we’ll miss you, babe. Maybe we can convince you to come to a party with us soon.” Tate flashed a wicked smile as he got up and hugged me tightly. I couldn’t help but feel his hard on against me, but he didn’t look embarrassed in the slightest. If anything, he’d wanted me to feel it. “You look like a gods damned angel.”

“Thanks, Tate.” I smiled and pulled away.

Wells stood up and strode over to me like I was his prey. “You look like a shining star.”

“Thank you.” My cheeks flamed as I held open my arms and hugged him.

His arms came around me, and he kissed my head gently. “Be safe. Don’t stray from Raiden. People like the ones you’ll meet tonight are difficult.”

“I will,” I promised, stepping back.

Raiden moved forward and plucked the necklace from my hand, clasping it around my neck. “Shall we?”

A smile spread across my face, and I slipped my black heels on. “Yes.”

I’d been wanting to meet his father, but I didn’t know what to expect from him.



RAIDEN TURNED INTO HIS ESTATE AND PULLED UP TO THE security station located at the gated entrance, and my mouth dropped.

The paved driveway was long and well lit, leading up to a white stucco mansion that loomed at least five stories.

Floodlights surrounded it, casting a cold gleam over it. It was massive. I could see a few other buildings on the property, but they were further away.

He rolled the window down and nodded at the security, who opened the gate without a word before rolling the window back up.

“I’m technically his heir,” he muttered, pressing the gas and taking us up the long drive. “He runs a corporate company that delves in pharmaceuticals.”

“Technically?” I frowned, glancing out the window.

Pharmaceuticals did not sound like something Raiden would enjoy.

Fields of leafy green vines to wires and posts filled the area to the right, and rows of hard-packed earth were between the vines.

“Our estate doubles as a winery. It’s a pastime my father enjoys,” he stated, shoulders ridged.

Raiden had been tense the entire hour ride over.

“Raiden...” I reached over and rested my hand on his thigh. “What’s going on?”

He blew out a steady breath and glanced at me. “Father isn’t very...caring. He demands respect, and I give it to him because I have to. But we do not get along by any means.”

“I unfortunately figured that much.” I squeezed his thigh before pulling my hand back and placing both hands in my lap as we pulled into a designated parking spot along the long drive. “Is there anything I could do to help?”

He unbuckled his seatbelt and turned off the car. “Stay by my side.”

Getting out of the car, he came to my side and opened the door for me to get out.

“I won’t stray,” I promised him, my heels clicking on the stone pathway from the drive to the mansion as I got out.

“Thank you,” he breathed, extending his arm.

I took it, looping mine through his. “Anything for you, Raiden.”

His lips quirked into a lopsided smile, and I took the moment to really appreciate him in a black suit and tie with shiny black shoes.

Gods, the man was attractive. His dark hair was slicked back, and purple highlights reflected off the stream from the floodlights that had turned on due to the night approaching rapidly.

Manicured hedges and shrubs were placed strategically around the mansion.

A cool breeze slid through the evening air, bringing a sweet honeyed scent of blossoming flowers.

“You’re simply beautiful, little rose.” His tone was smooth, but his demeanor was tight, like he was prepared for everything to go wrong.

I tightened my grip on my boyfriend as we strolled up the path to the mansion, through the expansive entryway with opened double doors, and into a sea of fancy patrons.

My breath caught as my heels clicked on the stark white marble, and I glanced up at the fancy chandeliers hanging from high ceilings with crown molding.

A waiter came by with a tray of white wine, and Raiden plucked one from it so I did the same.

A faint tune of classical music came from the live entertainment in the center of the foyer—if I could call it that. It was more like walking into a ballroom.

The weight of the wine shifted as I swirled the liquid and brought it to my lips to sip. My eyes widened as I pulled the glass away and glanced at Raiden. “This is delicious.”

He sipped his own. “It’s one plus of living here. He makes some of the best wine. The red wine is good, but the white is better.”

“Raiden!” A powerful tone rang out as a man with the same dark hair with violet highlights as Raiden strolled up in a

suit like his son's.

I knew right away that it was Raiden's father. The only difference between the two was age and their eyes. His father had haunting yellow-colored eyes that were trained on me.

"Father." Raiden dipped his head in respect.

"And who is your date?"

I offered my hand out. "My name is Primrose. It's a pleasure, Mr. Ashwood."

He took my hand and shook it firmly before a smile broke out on his face. "Pleasure's all mine. You may call me Ashland." He slid his gaze to his son. "Well done, son. She's a delight."

Raiden flashed him a respectful but tight smile. "That she is."

His attention turned to me. "May I assume you attend MANA Sim Academy with my son?"

"You're correct." I nodded, pulling my hand back and resting both hands on the stem of the wine glass. "I'm in the same class as Raiden. He's very talented with magic, but his photography is truly impressive. I could go on all day about how innovative his thought process is when it comes to photography and magic."

His posture straightened, and he sent Raiden a frown, but he maintained professionalism. "Is that so? Perhaps I should take more of an interest."

Raiden's gaze dropped to the floor. "I would love to show you, Father."

"If he pursued it, I'm positive he'd be famous," I talked him up. Raiden loved photography, and it was clear from the way he'd talked that his dad didn't share the same passion. "The way he can manipulate magic to increase the quality and whimsy of his photos is incredible. You raised a talented son. Art has become more renowned nowadays, and I've noticed magic becoming implemented with certain mediums. It takes everything to the next level." I bowed my head to try and

expel the tension. “Excuse me if I am speaking out of turn. I just got a little too enthused over your son’s passion.”

“Not at all.” Ashland barked a laugh and squeezed his son’s shoulder in a friendly manner that had Raiden looking shocked. “I didn’t realize how exquisite photography could be nor did I know how talented my son was. Perhaps we could use that skill for the marketing aspect of the family business.”

“That’s an interesting thought.” Raiden nodded. I couldn’t ignore the way his body tensed to the point his fingers trembled, so I slid one of my hands into his.

“Your home is beautiful,” I added. “Raiden told me it doubles as a winery, and this is the best wine I’ve ever tasted.” I held up the glass and swirled the wine.

Ashland’s smile grew. “You sure are a delight! Raiden, don’t be hiding this one. Bring her around more.”

Raiden’s jaw went slack, but he nodded. “Of course, Father.”

“Well, I must mingle.” Ashland practically pouted, and the way he looked at Raiden was full of surprise and pride. “Do enjoy yourselves.”

“Thank you.” I bowed my head along with Raiden as his father went toward another set of people.

Raiden deflated with a harsh exhale. “What the hell was that? How did you do that?”

“What do you mean?” I tilted my head, my hair falling into my face. “I just talked about you because I like you.”

“You rambled good things about me in front of my father,” he stated as if it was some impossible feat. “And he *listened*.”

I squeezed his hand tightly. “I hope I didn’t speak out of turn.”

His gaze snapped to mine, and he used his other hand to tuck a piece of my hair behind my ear. His heart-o-meter increased to four. “No, little rose. You did great.”

My breath hitched, and a flash of orange caught my attention over Raiden's shoulder. "Raiden, Al's here," I hissed, stepping into his chest to shield me from him.

Noodles, Al looked handsome. His hair was pulled up in a bun, and he wore a tan suit with a pale green tie.

He glanced behind him, and his body went rigid. "Do we need to leave?"

"No, I don't want to leave yet. We just arrived." My voice wavered.

"Sorry." He turned toward me. "I didn't realize he'd be here. It was dumb. Of course he'd be here. His parents would've made him go, but little rose, we should head out."

"I meant to speak with him, anyway." I stepped back and looked into Raiden's violet gaze.

"Dance with me first," he urged, tugging me to his side and placing our wine glasses on a nearby table before striding us away from Al and toward the dance floor where a few couples slow danced.

"What's wrong?" I flattened my lips and went to glance behind me, but Raiden pulled me tighter to him.

"Trust me, little rose." He rested his hands on my hips, and his fingers dug into my flesh. I wished the fabric hadn't been between us.

"I always trust you." I placed my arms around his neck as we began to sway to the music.

His black raspberry scent carried a hint of wine, and I sighed in contentment as we danced.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my cheek. "Don't look or anything, little rose. Listen to my voice, but just know that it's probably some type of misunderstanding. I've been watching since I noticed."

"Noticed what?" I pulled back slightly, concern gnawing at me. "You're freaking me out a bit."

"Alderidge is here with his parents...and a woman."

A weight pressed against my chest and robbed me of my breath.

“It doesn’t seem like he wants to be here with her. He keeps avoiding her touch and will not speak with her. He looks miserable,” he went on, and my phone vibrated in my clutch. “He’s on the phone, and the woman looks aggravated.”

“A *woman*?” I croaked as we danced slowly, and I opened my clutch to see his name on my phone. “He’s calling me.”

I glanced over as we spun around, and air stalled in my lungs. Jealousy burrowed deep in my chest.

Al was here, and by his side was a woman I’d recognized from the academy. She was on the council with him, I believed.

She was tall and the same height as Al with heels on. She wore a beautiful pink gown that fluffed at the bottom, and she had long straight white-blonde hair that hit her midsection. Green eyes looked up at Al with a certain possessiveness that made my blood boil.

But Al didn’t want anything to do with her, and Raiden was right. He looked miserable.

A sick sense of happiness swelled up in me knowing he clearly wasn’t here with her willingly.

He glanced up, and his gaze connected with mine. A twitch cracked the edges of his mouth, and he smiled as he realized it was me. He noticed I was with Raiden, but he didn’t seem upset. If anything, he looked relieved.

Raiden groaned in my ear and stopped swaying. “Alderidge’s parents are coming this way.”

We stopped dancing and glided off the dance floor to meet with who I assumed were Al’s parents.

Al’s father had striking blue eyes that were blank and dark brown hair. He plastered on a polite smile. “Hello, Raiden. Your father threw an amazing Gala, as usual.”

“As usual.” Raiden had a tight smile, clutching me tightly against him.

“And who is this?” Al’s dad glanced at me.

“I’m Primrose.” I offered a smile.

“She’s my girlfriend,” Raiden clarified.

“I’m Jack, and this is my wife, Kelsey. We’re Alderidge Venturo’s parents. Do you know him?”

I nodded, face heating as my heart pounded hard in my chest.

“She does,” Raiden said.

Al’s mother had the same honey eyes as her son, but nowhere near as kind or warm. They were cold, and her smile wasn’t genuine as she smoothed out her golden dress that complimented her light brown hair. “It’s lovely to see you here with a date. My Alderidge brought a date, too. Can you believe you boys have grown into two handsome, accomplished men?”

She glanced over to Alderidge and his *date* and waved them over.

Alderidge’s gaze was locked on mine as he strode toward us, his date rushing next to him to keep up. HEART EVENT TRIGGERED was above him.

He stopped in front of me. “You haven’t answered your phone,” he blurted. “I’ve been calling you since yesterday.”

My breaths came out in short pants before I calmed my breathing. “I was going to call you back tomorrow. What made you decide to start calling, anyway?”

“Alderidge!” his mother snapped, her cool facade fading for a split moment. “You know this girl?”

“I realized I messed up.” He ignored his mother as he stared at me in awe. “You look stunning, Prim.”

“Alderidge,” Jack barked at his son, and I noticed we started attracting attention. “You’re being disrespectful to April and Raiden.”

“April isn’t my date,” Alderidge snapped with an irritated sigh.

“Yes, I am!” April, the date, whined, stomping her foot. “And this is the same Primrose dating two other guys. The entire academy’s talking about it. Why are you here with Raiden? For his money?”

“I’m with Raiden because he’s amazing. I don’t care about his money.” I narrowed my gaze at the new girl that I did not like. “Really tasteless of you to bring my romantic relationships up during a charity Gala, though.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t go after someone else’s date when you have your own!” She pursed her lips together like she’d tasted something sour.

“Al can do whatever he wants,” I shot back.

“Multiple boyfriends?” Al’s mom’s face paled as she looked at me in horror.

“As in a consensual arrangement?” Jack asked in a strained tone.

“Of course,” Raiden answered for me at the same time as Al did.

“And I want to be part of it,” Al stated, moving forward and taking my hand in his. “I should never have questioned it. I know how I feel about you, Prim. That’s all that matters.”

“About time you figured it out.” Raiden’s hand stroked down my back, and I leaned into it.

“My feelings for you haven’t changed,” I murmured, staring into the glossy honey eyes of Al’s.

Al’s heart-o-meter jumped to four.

“I forbid it!” Kelsey shouted, grabbing her son’s arm and trying to pull him off me.

He jerked away from her and let go of me as he whirled on his mother. “It doesn’t matter what you want. I’ve been your puppet for as long as I can remember. I’ve never questioned anything you’ve told me to do. This is something I want.”

“You don’t know what you’re getting into.” Jack shook his head with disbelief blooming over his features. “How can you

actually be open to this?”

“You were at one point, too,” Al snapped at his father.

“But he realized how wrong it was!” Kelsey redirected, placing her hands on April’s shoulders. “He couldn’t handle the jealousy. It’s not natural, Alderidge. You will *not* disgrace the family name like this. You will go and dance with April and never interact with this girl again.”

“I will not.” Al came and stood on the other side of me. “This is where I choose to be. Uncle Arthur was the one who had it right.”

“Arthur is delusional!” Kelsey sputtered, and Jack just looked shocked.

Ashland picked that moment to amble over with a glass of wine in his hand. He stood next to Raiden with a dangerously cold expression. “What’s the commotion over here?”

“Your son’s date is indecent!” Kelsey claimed, pulling April closer.

“She’s stolen my date!” April told on me like a petulant child.

Jack just shook his head. “My son has disgraced the Venturo name by wanting to be with a woman who wants more than one man.”

“There’s nothing wrong with having feelings for multiple partners,” I spoke firmly. “My boyfriends are all very aware of the relationships I am in, and we all hang out together. If we are all happy, it shouldn’t matter to anyone else.”

“Primrose is a treasure,” Raiden stated. “She’s kind, beautiful, smart, and strong-willed. If she feels things for someone else, then so be it. So long as they’re not a bad person, I’m fine with it.”

“So am I.” Al stared at me. “I shouldn’t have been so closed-minded. You’ve been nothing but honest and open with me. The fact that your heart-o-meter is five hearts should’ve told me that you’re it for me.”

My heart swelled with the acceptance I'd wanted from him before.

"Delusional!" Kelsey tossed her arms in the air as she shot me a venomous glare.

"Excuse me," Ashland interrupted smoothly, swirling his wine before sipping it. "But Primrose is my son's girlfriend. Whether or not she's got other boyfriends is not my concern so long as my son has made the informed choice to continue the relationship. Besides, men have kept harems, and nobody ever bats an eye."

"Thank you, Father." Raiden's entire body was trembling next to me, and I wrapped my arm around his back.

Ashland's gaze was harsh as it slipped to Raiden but softened on me. "Your relationships don't define you. I believe you're a talented young lady, and I think you're good for my son and our family name. As long as your relationships are just and not deviant by nature, I couldn't care less about the details."

"Thank you, Mr. Ashwood." I bowed my head to him. "That means a lot."

"Thank you, Father," Raiden repeated respectfully, shifting his weight on his feet. "I appreciate your acceptance."

Kelsey and Jack sputtered an apology, but it wasn't very intelligible.

"This is a lovely event, but I think I would like to leave due to this conflict." I glanced at Raiden, interrupting Al's parents.

"Of course, little rose." His lips twitched into a smirk as he stared at Al. "Will we be leaving alone or is the president accompanying us?"

"He's not." April's tone was clipped.

"Nobody asked you." I batted my eyelashes at her, and her nostrils flared.

"If Prim doesn't mind, I'd prefer to accompany you both back to campus," Al answered immediately, looking at me

with a hopeful expression.

“I’d love nothing more.” I smiled before cutting my gaze to Raiden’s father. “Please excuse our early departure.”

Ashland took another sip. “No need to apologize. My guests made you uncomfortable. This will definitely be something discussed with my business partners at a later date.” He glared at Al’s parents before turning and walking away with them both stumbling behind him.



Raiden’s muscles in his body were so tense that I had to tug him a bit before he snapped out of it. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I’d like nothing more,” Al mumbled, gaze on me.

Having Al and Raiden leaving the Gala on each arm filled my heart with love and acceptance in a way that only these men could do.

With each heart filled on their heart-o-meter’s, the more adoration for them I felt. I didn’t know what love was, but I thought this feeling was the closest thing to it.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 
COLT: 
CYRUS: 
RAIDEN: 
TATE: 
WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

Stumbling into my dorm room and tripping over my own shoe somehow caused Al and Raiden to smack into each other as they reached for me.

All three of us ended up sprawled out on the cold marble, face first, and slowly peeling ourselves up to look at a pissed off Leaf.

A pissed off Leaf with mud all over her and a misty spray being conjured as she was interrupted singing opera.

“What do you think you’re doing home so *early*?” she screeched, dousing the mud off her with water magic and drying herself with the wind before red flowers sprouted all over her.

I’d learned that meant she was embarrassed.

“That was beautiful,” Al mumbled, his cheeks aflame with the same embarrassment.

“Sorry, Leaf,” Raiden chuckled weakly.

“Seriously wicked voice, though,” I fist-pumped the air where I was still on the ground, losing traction and falling against the hard floor again. “Ow.”

Leaf huffed a sigh and used wind magic again, this time to help the three of us back into standing positions.

“How can you use magic without incantations?” I asked, realizing Leaf *never* spoke incantations.

Al and Raiden snorted a laugh.

“What?” I asked with a frown.

“Leaf’s a magical being, Prim.” Al shifted on his feet.

“She’s able to use magic without incantations because she *is* magic.” Raiden reached out and slid his fingers down my arm, leaving goosebumps in their wake. “You don’t know much about magic, do you?”

Al frowned, and he and Leaf exchanged a look.

“Well, I’m out.” Leaf groaned, floating toward the door. “I’ll be back in two hours. Enjoy your time wisely, but please remember, I’ll be back.” The door opened and closed before any of us could reply.

Al, Raiden, and I glanced at each other awkwardly.

“She really knows how to set the scene.” I laughed nervously, kicking off my heels where they hit the ground with a rolling few clicks.

“Why do you know so little about magic, little rose?” Raiden furrowed his brows.

“I have wondered. It’s like you’ve been isolated without magic completely,” Al murmured, crossing his arms.

“Um...” My feet padded over to the dresser, and I pulled out a t-shirt of Colt’s and set it on the top. “How about we just get into something more comfortable?”

I reached both arms back to grab the zipper, but my shoulder blades felt like they were on fire, so I dropped my arms and glanced back at both of them. “Can you help me out of this?”

“Which one of us?” Al rasped, glancing at Raiden with a sort of innocence I hadn’t expected from him.

“I’ve got you,” Raiden said, strolling over and unzipping the back until it hit just above my ass.

Al cutely turned to stare at the wall, and his Adam’s apple bobbed.

Raiden slipped his hands up my sides and stepped forward until his chest hit my back. “Care if I stay tonight?”

All of my men had been trying relentlessly to stay the night or for me to stay with them, but it hadn't felt right to. I still needed to get Cyrus on board. But I had to admit that I was tired of keeping the rest at arm's length.

"Leaf *did* give us the go ahead for you both to stay the night," I murmured, craning my head back to look at him. "Let me text the rest of the guys, just to tell them."

Raiden stepped back to give me space as he kicked his shoes off and stripped down to his boxers.

My mouth watered at the sight of his exposed flesh, but I swore the outline of his dick gave me heart palpitations.

"Me, too?" Al croaked.

"As long as you want to, I mean." I let the dress slip the rest of the way off until it landed in a puddle at my feet, and I pulled Colt's shirt over my head before undoing my bra under it and taking it off, too.

"I want to." He jerked his hair tie out of his hair and his orange locks poured down around him.

"I'm exhausted, so I'm really looking forward to cuddling," I admitted, longing for the physical type of comfort.

Grabbing a makeup remover wipe from the top drawer, I cleaned my face the best I could without going to the bathroom.

"I can't wait to hold you." Al stripped to his boxers, too.

And *noodles!* He was perfect as always.

"Don't forget, we're sharing," Raiden reminded him with a hint of possession in his tone.

I grabbed my phone out of the clutch and a giggle erupted from my belly, spontaneous and joyful, and I dove into the middle of my bed before texting the others in our group chat.

PRIMROSE

The 'no sleeping over' ban is lifted. Al finally came around, and Al and Raiden are staying over at my dorm tonight. Just an update. Thinking of you three. (Heart emoji eyes)

Then, I added Al to the chat.

ALDERIDGE ADDED TO THE GROUP CHAT:
SEXY HAREM

Tate had named it, of course. The name made me smile. I loved when they would text back and forth with each other and not just me.

Raiden wasted no time getting his phone and moving into bed next to me.

“Sexy harem?” Al questioned, phone in hand as he slipped into the other side of the bed.

“Tate,” Raiden said as if that explained it, and it did. But Al didn't know Tate like we did yet.

“He's funny,” I protested with a giggle.

Colt was the first to respond.

COLT

I've been trying for months, pretty girl. I'm always missing out. (Sad face emoji)

Glad Al finally pulled his head out of his ass tho. (Satisfied smirk emoji)

TATE

I'm next, babe. That bed is mine tomorrow. Just like you. (Tongue sticking out emoji)

COLT

You have two men with you tonight, I'm calling dibs with Tate. You're ours.

Sorry, Wells.

WELLS

I want you to be mine all night. I'll plan a date, but it's ending in my studio, beautiful. (Heart emoji)

My heart fluttered.

RAIDEN

Glad it's established that sleepover nights are allowed, but Al and I will be occupying her time now.

My face flamed, and Al's breath hitched.

RAIDEN

Isn't that right, little rose? (Kiss emoji)

PRIMROSE

Talk to you three tomorrow. Good night. (Kiss emoji)

COLT

I'm always missing out! (Horrified emoji)

Good night, pretty girl.

TATE

You better kiss and tell! (Winky face emoji)

Night, babe!

WELLS

Have fun. Good night, beautiful.

Al deposited his phone on the nightstand with a thump and buried his face in his hands. His biceps bulged from the movement.

I licked my bottom lip as I handed my phone to Raiden, who put both of ours on his nightstand.

“Tonight was insane.” I shimmied underneath the comforter and lay down.

Raiden was the first to move closer and wrap his arms around me. “You were breathtaking, as always. I enjoyed my time with you, and I loathe that estate.”

My expression fell as I glanced at him, his breath fanning over my lips. “I could tell you were uncomfortable.”

“Sorry for making a show, Raiden.” Al frowned, scooting close to me until I was held by both of them.

It was heaven. I may have died in my old life, but this? This *was* heaven.

“The way Father acted by supporting us had been a welcomed shock, but I’m afraid of backlash from him later.” Raiden took in a stuttered breath. “He seemed to actually respect you, little rose.”

“He’s right to.” Al groaned, his body finally starting to relax. “I’m sorry about my parents, Prim.”

“It’s not like you can control their actions.” I swallowed a lump in my throat. “Why were you there with April? It was

very obvious you didn't want to be."

"I didn't come with her." He heaved a sigh as his head dropped against my shoulder. "I was ambushed by her and my parents when I came. I'd told them no, but they brought her anyway."

Relief washed over me from the words even though I'd known he hadn't willingly been there with her, it was good to hear it from his mouth. "Good."

"What do you mean backlash, Raiden?" Al asked, and I turned toward Raiden.

His face was paler than usual. "Father isn't the understanding type." He shook his head before glancing at me. "I've never heard you talk about your family."

"There's nothing to talk about," I murmured.

Being reincarnated magically into this world at my age meant I had no family. Leaf was the closest thing I had to family here with how she looked after me. But that was because she was my guardian.

Al and Raiden shifted slightly, bringing themselves closer and smooshing me even more between them.

It felt good. Their heart-o-meters were both flashing at four hearts, and the buzzing in my veins made me feel at home in a way I knew I hadn't felt in my previous life.

"You have us," Al mumbled, kissing the side of my head.

I turned and caught his lips with my own, and they were as soft as I'd imagined.

A sharp inhale of breath came from him as I pulled back. "Thank you, Al."

Raiden gripped my chin and turned me toward him before giving me a brutal kiss and pulling away with a smirk. "We're your family now, little rose. Gods knows that my family dynamic sucks."

"Solidarity," Al whispered. "Creating a new, welcoming family sounds amazing."

And it did.

The three of us talked aimlessly about random things until I fell asleep between them with my heart full.

I knew without a doubt my heart-o-meter must've been glowing.

PRIMROSE

I t'd been a week since the Gala, and everything seemed to be looking up with my love interests.

Unfortunately, I made less than stellar progress with Cyrus. Instead of avoiding me, he was actively trying to make my life harder.

I couldn't count the amount of extra assignments or essays I'd been stuck with all for not knowing an answer that he hadn't taught us yet. This was Basics, for noodle's sake! But he, along with everyone else at this point, knew that I knew less than the basics about the fundamentals of magic that I would've known had I actually grown up in this world.

I wouldn't say it was embarrassing, but it was irritating.

"Conjure flames," I muttered the incantation Professor Shades had taught us spitefully as I thought of my darn water professor.

I was paired up with Colt, and Raiden and Wells were paired together. Tate had skipped class for practice since they had a game coming up.

Colt and I snagged the spot next to the door, and the guys were next to us. The three of them had already cast the spell and were manipulating the fire magic perfectly.

Heat tingled on the palm of my hand before sparks erupted. My MANA began depleting rapidly, distracting me only slightly before I lost control.

“Oh, no!” Flames licked up my hand, and heat scorched my arm as it struck up and caught the sleeve of my shirt on fire.

The burning smell of fabric hit my nose.

“Fuck, pretty girl.” Colt went to move his hand toward me, forgetting he was manipulating flames already.

“Colt!” I tried warning him, but he directed his spell toward me.

More flames flew my way, making the flames spread across the fabric on my body.

“Douse!” Raiden shouted from behind me, turning his flames into water that dumped over me like a bucket, effectively distinguishing the flames.

I folded my body over itself to cover everything I could as adrenaline pulsed through my system, and I slammed my eyes shut.

“Please tell me I’m not naked,” I whispered before Wells’s t-shirt was shoved snugly over my head and Raiden’s jacket was tossed over me.

“Not anymore, beautiful,” Wells murmured.

“Can you not be a slut for once?” Caryn’s voice rang out, sharp and piercing.

Embarrassment washed over me hotter than the flames had, but I turned to glare at her.

“Caryn, language!” Professor Shades shouted, coming to my defense.

Before I could snap back at her, Wells did.

“Could you just shut your mouth for one gods damn second?” Wells snarled.

“Who cares about what some mean girl says?” Raiden added.

“Primrose is the furthest thing from a slut,” Colt stated, tone cold. “She’s dating multiple men, okay, so what? We’re

all aware of it. There's respect, and there's caring, and there's kindness. Unlike you. You dated Tate and fucked one of his best friends behind his back. That's a slut."

The class burst into whispers and chuckles.

"Class dismissed." Professor Shades attempted to get control of the class as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "I am already aware you won't learn anything else after this... incident."

"She's fucking more than just two!" she shouted, pointing her finger at me, and nobody got up from their seats.

"I haven't slept with any of them," I bit out, slipping my arms through the holes of the shirt and tightening the jacket around me as I sat up straighter. "But if, no, when, I do, they will *all* stay informed. You did it behind his back."

"You're still a whore for entertaining them all!" She crossed her arms as she stood and glowered at me.

"Write a report on respectfulness, Caryn." Professor Shades slammed his hand on the desk before glancing at us. "You may all leave, except for Primrose and her...boyfriends."

"Thank you." The guys helped me to my feet as I glared at Caryn. "For the record, I'm in a consensual relationship. The men I am with and the one man I am still pursuing are it. I'm loyal to them, and they're my endgame. If that means I'm a whore, fine, but you talking down to me constantly isn't going to change anything."

"Go, now," Professor Shades snapped, as we moved away from the door for the students to file out, Caryn glaring at me the entire time.

"Primrose, I've noticed you've been struggling with theory along with wielding magic in general," Professor Shades stated, glancing over my head at the wall.

The guys had formed a barrier around me to shield me from view.

"Sorry," I mumbled, glancing down at my feet.

“I’ve set you up with a tutor. Alderidge Venturo. He’s an—”

“Intermediate student, class president, and my boyfriend,” I finished for him.

His mouth went slack with shock before clearing his throat. “Right, well, do study with him to prepare for finals. Every Thursday morning for an hour. You start tomorrow. Now, go get a new uniform on, and pay attention when you wield fire. What if that had been your hair or if it burnt you? You wouldn’t have gotten away so easily.”

“Thanks, Professor Shades.” I groaned.



GETTING DRESSED BACK AT THE DORMS WHILE GETTING scolded by Leaf had been easy compared to all of the gawking I had across campus while wearing my boyfriend’s shirt and my other boyfriend’s jacket, but we made it.

Now, I sat between Colt and Tate with Raiden and Wells on the other sides of them as I tried to avoid getting called on by Professor Rowe...

My phone buzzed as he was talking about manipulating water, and I glanced at it.

LIZA

Dude. Everyone is talking about your two walks of shame. You okay?

I bit down on my bottom lip to contain the dramatic groan I wanted to express. Of course everyone had heard about it already. My thumbs flew over the touch screen to text her back.

PRIMROSE

(Facepalm emoji) Oh, I'm just fine. Love being talked about.

LIZA

Lunch tomorrow with my brother and Hal? Please?

“Primrose?” Cyrus snapped, and my head jolted up to meet his gaze. “I know you’re probably having an enthralling discussion on your phone, but I’m being paid to teach you. This academy is for the best magic users, and from what I can tell, you need to remember why you’re here.”

Caryn and her friends giggled somewhere behind me.

“What a jerk,” Colt grumbled.

“Sure you want him, babe?” Tate asked.

Ignoring them, I replied, “I know exactly why I’m here, Professor Rowe.”

To fall in love, obviously. And I *was*.

I was falling in love with Al, Colt, Raiden, Tate, and Wells, but I wanted to fall in love with Cyrus, too.

But I didn’t know how many more chances I could give him to get his head out of his own ass. Even the rest of my men were getting frustrated with him.

Once I spoke my peace on the matter, I would respect his wishes. I just needed him to officially hear me out.

“Then please explain to me why manipulating water is different than manipulating fire,” he requested, his expression tight.

I brushed my palms together with a sigh. “Water manipulation is caused by clearing your mind and relaxing. Fire manipulation needs tight control and focus.”

“What happens if you don’t relax?” He arched a brow.

“It won’t work,” I guessed.

“That’s half correct.” He held his hand up to the cup of water on his desk and breathed out. “Manipulate water.”

The water snaked out of the cup in a cylindrical wave. “This is when I’m relaxed, calm, and just manipulating the water with a clear mind, but…” The water stream began to waver before it exploded, water droplets coming down on all of us like it was raining.

I shivered from the coldness of it as he met my gaze.

“That is what happens when you let yourself focus on anything that may upset you. It’s very easy to do.” He glanced at a clock behind him. “That’s it for today. Have a great time, and Primrose, a word?”

Caryn cackled again, and everyone else got up and started to leave.

“You don’t have to stay back,” Tate mumbled with a pout.

“Actually, she kinda does,” Colt said. “He’s still our professor.”

“But she doesn’t have to stay alone.” Raiden leaned forward.

“No, she doesn’t.” Wells crossed his arms.

“A word without your boyfriends, please.” Cyrus’s gaze skipped over the guys and seared into me.

“Join us,” Colt whispered alluringly as a joke.

“Please, Primrose?” Cyrus sighed.

“I’ll be fine, guys. Promise.” I turned to look at Colt but was met with a kiss.

“Fine, pretty girl.” He kissed me again before getting up.

“We’ll wait outside.” Raiden moved over and kissed me.

“Yell if you need us,” Tate told me, turning my head and kissing me, too.

Wells leaned over me and kissed me as well. “Or text.”

“See you in a minute,” I told them as they left the classroom, shutting the door softly behind them.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted.

Surprise rippled through me. I got out of my seat and planted myself in front of Cyrus. “What are you sorry for?”

I asked the question carefully, hoping he was truly sorry and not doing that thing men do when they say sorry but they don’t actually mean it.

“I was rude to you today in class. It was a mistake, so I needed to apologize.”

The hope that had sparked to life in my chest dimmed. “That’s all?”

“Yes, Miss. Farrington.” He turned his attention to his laptop on his desk. “You may go now.”

“Unbelievable.” I shook my head, anger swelling to the surface. “You’ve been tossing essay after essay at me, and you’ve belittled me in class constantly—”

“I just apologized for—”

“I’m not done, and I’m talking about this entire month, not just today!” I raised my voice, smacking my hand on the smooth wood of his desk. “I know I’m not as skilled as others in magic—”

“Obviously.” He snorted.

“What does *that* mean?” I narrowed my gaze.

He clenched the edge of his desk. “It means that you’ve been struggling with magic fundamentals. I’m honestly surprised you passed the entrance exam.”

I didn’t.

“Thanks, Cyrus.” I forced my face to remain neutral even though I wanted to scream at him. “Great apology.”

The tension in his body grew, and he gritted his teeth. “Do you need a tutor?”

“Are you offering?” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“I can find a suitable—”

“Don’t bother.” I raised my hand as I cut him off. “Al is already my tutor thanks to Professor Shades.”

“Of course he is.” He groaned, and his knuckles turned a white color as he clutched his desk tighter. “I heard about the incident in Fire Basics.”

My face flamed with heat, and I ducked my head down. “Who hasn’t? It wasn’t something I meant to happen.”

“If you need further assistance with your education, I don’t mind helping you, Primrose.” He relaxed his fingers and practically pried his hand from his desk with a chuckle. “I wish things were different for us,” he muttered under his breath.

His words lit a metaphorical fire under my ass, and I yanked my phone out before replying to Liza.

PRIMROSE

Count me in. Cyrus isn’t giving me a fair chance because I’m a student.

LIZA

Yep. That’s my morally just brother. (Eye roll emoji)
Even though it’s not forbidden, he still feels it’s unprofessional.

My eyes darted to his, and I smiled sweetly. “I’m coming to lunch with you, Liza, and Hal tomorrow. You’re going to hear me out, Cyrus.”

As he opened his mouth to reply, I shook my head. “Please don’t sabotage what we could have before we even try it.”

Cyrus’s hard expression softened as he blew out a heavy breath. “I owe it to us to at least hear you out, but I can’t promise anything.”

“All I want is to have an open discussion with you.” My chest ached with what could be if he’d just open his heart to me.

CYRUS

After Primrose left my classroom, I snatched my poetry journal out of my desk and slammed it down, opening to a random page and pouring out my twisted and complex feelings.

Gardener in the wind; Rose in the garden.

If only he could make his desire for more harden.

Alluring and beautiful, the rose wouldn't be pardoned.

For their love would be stifled by societal norms, stirring jealousy among the other blossoms.

Pain spread through my chest as I stared at the ink on the page holding more raw truth than I'd like. My poetry was usually more poetic and complex. But this one was straightforward.

I hadn't wanted to become a professor, and I didn't even have a background in teaching. I did, however, have a magical prowess that I'd pursued before I'd discovered my passion for poetry.

But one day, the dean of this academy offered me a significant paycheck and begged me to fill the position for one year. She wouldn't expand on it, but she made me a monetary offer I couldn't refuse.

One year's paycheck would've paid my house off, so it was a rather easy decision. Being a full-time poet paid my bills and then some, but if I could put myself in an even better financial place, it was perfect.

Water had been the only elemental course I was able to take over, and it worked since water was my preferred element. It was the one I was naturally good at, but that didn't matter to me.

I was a poet, through and through.

Teaching didn't fuel my soul the way poetry did. But it was still a profession held in high regard.

There was an age difference between Primrose and I, but it didn't bother me. Her dating multiple men didn't bother me, either.

After seeing my sister and her two boyfriends functioning normally, that lifestyle did little to upset me. So long as Primrose was respectful to all of her boyfriends, that was what mattered.

What did bother me was that I was her acting professor, and I was professional by nature. If things were to progress, it was possible I could've gotten another professor to go over any graded assignments to cover any bias.

But Primrose lacked a lot of fundamental knowledge of magic. It was as if she'd never heard of magic before coming here.

I truly didn't understand how she'd managed to get enrolled.

A selfish part of me didn't care how. I was just happy she was here.

"Liza told me that Primrose is joining us for lunch tomorrow," Hal startled me as he strolled into my classroom

unannounced as usual. “Woah, the great C. Russ is actually writing again?”

I gave a brisk nod, trailing my fingertips over the grooves in the page from my words. Even with his sarcasm, I knew he was genuinely surprised.

“You haven’t written since you took this job.” His voice softened. “This is a big deal for you.”

I dropped my hand with a sigh. “This job is only for a year, but I’m adapting to the stress load.”

“Or someone is inspiring you.” He wiggled his brows, closing the distance and leaning against my desk. “Let’s talk about her. Primrose, right? Nice girl. Best friends with my girlfriend...your *sister*.”

“Best friends, huh?” I rubbed my jaw and shut my journal. “They’ve been hanging out an awful lot.”

“They have.” He grinned. “Give in. I haven’t seen you this hung up over any woman before, and you haven’t even kissed her.”

I slowly exhaled before filling my lungs again and repeating. “I don’t know what it is, Hal, but it’s almost like I’m...scared or something.”

“You are,” he replied bluntly. “Women are scary, but the woman you let into your heart? Freaking horrifying. They have the power to not only break your heart but your soul. That’s not something to give away easily for anyone. But when you do, and they are the right person? It’s an ecstasy I can’t describe.”

“You better not say my—”

“Your sister, yes. My soulmate.” He nodded dutifully.

Huffing out a breath, I smiled and placed my journal into my bag, hoisting it over my shoulder. “How do you not get jealous of Joey?”

“Joey’s one of my best friends now.” He shrugged. “Aside from you, of course. But he’s a good man who is there for the

woman I love in ways I can't be. We're different, and when I'm busy, he can be with her and vice versa."

I swallowed the constant lump that had settled into my throat. "I like Primrose, I really do."

I felt more protective of Prim than jealous over the other guys. The fact that I'd heard students talking about rumors of her being forced to be naked twice now had my blood boiling. I wasn't mad at her in the slightest as both instances were completely out of her control.

Even if it weren't, it was her body. I'd protect that right for her to do what she wanted with it, but I hated how I'd failed to protect her.

So did her other boyfriends.

Primrose having six men in her life as lovers and romantic partners didn't sound so bad when I thought about the struggles in life and knowing at least one of us would've had time to be by each other's side.

"Then hear her out, Cy. It's really not that hard." Hal grinned.

My chest tightened with every breath I took, and I knew it would be that way until tomorrow if she was really coming to lunch with Liza.

Pushing down my fear, I knew I owed it to Primrose to at least try.

PRIMROSE

“Have I mentioned that I love you?” I stared at Liza with what I was sure was a sparkle in my eyes as we sat in the backseat of Hal’s car with him and Joey up front.

She threw her head back with an intense cackle, and her silver hair tumbled down her shoulders. “Oh, honey. I love you even more! You’ll be the best sister-in-law I could ever want!”

Hal face-palmed with a sigh, running his hand up into his brown hair. “Now you’ve done it.”

“Totally done it,” Joey agreed, shooting us an amused look over his shoulder.

“Done what?” she challenged her boyfriend with a suggestive look. “Been the best friend in the entire world?”

“I mean, that’s entirely true.” I tossed my hair to the side and grinned at my crazy friend who had just given me the best news ever.

“I helped, too, you know.” Hal pouted. “I talked him into coming.”

“Of course you did, sweetie.” Liza leaned between the seats and kissed his cheek. “You did a great job appealing to Cy. Now, we leave it to Primrose.”

“Just remember that if he still is a bit of a jerk or refuses to let you explain, dump his ass.” Joey’s purple eyes narrowed on me. “Tate’s pissed at him as it is. If he screws this up, Tate won’t accept him into your group.”

I nodded, squirming in the seat. “He told me as much. Cyrus has been a jerk, so Tate has every right to be frustrated. I’m frustrated myself. But I owe it to my heart to try. If he hadn’t been my professor, I think he wouldn’t have distanced himself from me to begin with.”

“It’s not like staff and student involvement is a big deal,” Joey grumbled.

“But it is to Cy,” Hal reminded him.

“He’s only a professor for this year,” Liza told me with a groan, and my brows rose in surprise.

He was a natural teacher, in my opinion. I’d assumed it was a permanent occupation for him because it seemed to fit him so well. He commanded the room perfectly, and I knew I hung on every word that came out of his mouth—except when he was scolding me. Screw that.

I knew I wasn’t at the top of the class. I was far from it, but I tried, *dang it*. I freaking tried. Magic was new to me. The entire world was. But I couldn’t exactly tell him that...could I?

“If things go south, which they totally won’t, text me. We’ll come get you.” Liza wrapped her arms around me and squeezed me into a reassuring hug.

“And I’ll knock some sense into Cy if I have to.” Hal shot me an encouraging smile.

“But if that happens, he’s done. Tate told me to pass that along.” Joey held up his hands innocently. “Make sure he knows that.”

No pressure, right?

“Thanks for doing this.” I pulled back and stared at all of them.

Hal shrugged. “You’re good for Cy. You made him start writing again.”

“I still can’t believe he writes,” I murmured softly. “Poems of all things.”

“That’s why you wrote your own. Cy understands poetry more than anything.” Liza patted my pocket, where the poem I’d written about him rested.

I wrote it on Liza’s suggestion last night, and after *hours* of revisions and suggestions by Leaf, Liza, and Wells...it was done and burning a hole in the pocket of the one pair of jeans I was able to find.

Joey cleared his throat. “Tate’s been complaining about Cyrus and his reluctance, so if this gets him to shut up and focus on the game, I’m all about it.”

“We love you like family already.” Liza pushed my shoulder playfully, sending a quick glare toward Joey. “Now, go in there and get my brother to realize it.”

“Kick his ass if you have to,” Joey muttered, and Hal smacked him on the back of the head. “Shit, dude.”

“Behave,” Liza snapped sharply before smiling at me. “Have fun!”

I stifled a giggle and got out of the car before walking into the restaurant we were meeting Cyrus at.

Liza and Hal decided to ditch lunch and hang out with Joey instead, giving Cyrus and I a chance to actually talk about everything without an audience.

Fairy lights that streamed over the archway twinkled as I walked inside, and I spotted Cyrus immediately in the empty restaurant.

He sat in a booth over in the corner, a cup of ice water sitting on the table between his hands as he sipped it.

My breath caught. He looked like a dream, and I already knew he was my dream man...one of them.

His silver hair had been pulled back out of his face, but the ponytail hung over his shoulder and ended above his chest. He wore a simple gray long-sleeved t-shirt with jeans, and only Cyrus could make that look sophisticated.

I forced my legs to start moving and slipped into the other side with a nervous smile.

He jerked his head up and surprise flashed through his blue eyes. “Where’s Liza?”

“She and Hal made other plans. It’s just us.” I laced my fingers together in front of me on the table. “Will you give me a chance to explain things before running off or should I just give up now?”

His jaw went slack, and he dipped his head to stare at his drink. “I’m sorry, Primrose. I really haven’t been fair to you.”

“No, you haven’t,” I agreed, digging the poem out of my pocket and tossing it across the table.

It landed in front of him, and he opened it up, making the paper crinkle. His eyes scanned it with a sense of disbelief and excitement before flicking up to meet mine. “You...wrote me a poem?”

I nodded, pursing my lips. “I’ve always loved poetry, and I wanted to try my hand at it to convey exactly how I feel about you. If you still aren’t interested in hearing me out, I’ll leave now. I’m tired of this, Cyrus. I miss how you were when we first met, but if you won’t open yourself up to me like that again, I’m done.”

“I can see that,” he croaked, dipping his head down and taking a sip before clearing his throat and handing over a page with a few lines of writing. “I’m sorry, Primrose. I really am.”

My heart lurched to my throat as I took it and read it over, but with each line, my tension eased.

*Longing spreads through my veins,
Staring at the beauty she contains,
Beautiful rosebud elicits a desire
deep inside,
But should I abide,
To the rules of society,*

*Or should I quell the sense of
anxiety?*

A hard lesson learned,

To disregard what the heart yearned.

“A lesson learned?” My gaze met his over the page.

His heart-o-meter jumped up to three hearts as his lips twitched. “You’re the most alluring woman I’ve ever met, and we met in such a unique way that I haven’t been able to get you out of my head. Finding out you were my student was more than disheartening, Primrose. I’m technically in a position of authority over you even though we are both consenting adults, but I have a way to avoid any biases. If you still want me, that is.”

A waitress strode up to the table with a bright smile and left with my drink order and a full lunch order from both of us.

“I want you...*this*,” I told him.

“I was hoping you did. I want you, too. All of this. I even have Professor Zinman taking over your exams to grade.” He bit down on his bottom lip. “You’ll be sitting in on my lectures, and I’ll answer any questions you have, but anything graded will go through her.”

“I’m seeing five men, excluding you,” I blurted.

His lips twitched into a smirk. “That’s not what I’m concerned about, rosebud.”

“So your concern was that I was your student?” I tilted my head, furrowing my brows as I remembered all of our encounters. I’d remembered his jealousy.

“It was. I was concerned about the lifestyle at first, but it never made me *not* want you. I spoke with Hal about the jealousy, actually.” He chuckled, taking another sip of his drink as the waitress dropped mine off.

I thanked her and took a sip of the carbonated soda before turning my attention back to him. “What did he say?”

“Gave me the positives of sharing the complexities of relationships. If I’m busy, you’re taken care of by one of us.” He gave me a soft smile. “I was more or less jealous because I wasn’t part of it. I wasn’t able to kiss you or hold your hand like they could.”

“And now?” My heart thudded faster in my chest.

“Now, that’s all I want.” He reached over the table and carefully laced his fingers through mine, and the pleased look in his gaze made me shift in the booth. “I’ve been rude and acted childish with you. Can you forgive me for that?”

He *had* been a complete jerk lately. Nothing like the man I’d knocked off a ladder and on top of me. He’d been cold and distant, but it seemed like he knew that, and he was apologetic.

“The other guys are somewhat mad at you,” I informed him. “Tate almost rescinded his acceptance of you in the harem,” I added to let him know just how serious it was. His actions had hurt me deeply, and my boyfriends had seen it all firsthand.

His grip loosened, and he ran his other hand down his face. “I’m truly sorry. I’ll apologize to them as well. I know what I did, and I would drop to my knees here to apologize properly if you asked it of me.”

My lips curved into a smile. Seeing him on his knees wouldn’t have been the worst view. “I forgive you, Cyrus.”

He let out a breath of relief.






“But if you change your mind about us, even slightly, I’m not going to be giving you any second chances.”

“That’s more than generous, rosebud,” he murmured, staring at my lips before the waitress came back with our meals.

We shared lunch together for the first time, and he was kind and playful the rest of the conversation. It was like the

man I'd first met had finally come out to play—and I couldn't wait to get to know him even more.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 
COLT: 
CYRUS: 
RAIDEN: 
TATE: 
WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

Al's vibrant shade of orange hair reminded me of the warm glow from a setting sun. That was the best way I could've described it. His tousled locks fell out of the tight bun he'd pulled them back into and framed the defined yet gentle features of his face. There was a hint of determination etched into the lines of his brow as he spoke about fire magic.

Occasionally, a faint smile graced his lips, lips I'd kissed. Lips I wasn't ashamed to say that I was becoming addicted to.

"Prim, are you even paying attention to me?" His intense, honey-colored eyes lifted to meet mine.

He was such a beautiful man, and he was *all* mine.

"Uh huh," I mumbled, staring into his eyes.

"What did I say?" He arched one brow.

"Your expertise is in water and earth," I answered smoothly.

Al usually talked about the same subject for at least a dozen minutes at a time, so I knew I had it right even if I got a little bit distracted by his handsome face.

"And?" he quipped.

"Um..." I went to reach for the book, but his fingers laced through mine and stopped me.

He shot me an amused glance. "I mentioned that at least ten minutes ago before explaining that water and earth magic

make light magic. Then I mentioned that fire isn't my best element so I was surprised that Shades paired me with you as your tutor, not that I mind."

"Sorry." I squeezed his hand and offered him a sheepish smile. "I keep getting distracted."

"Is something bothering you?" His brows knitted together.

"Just how handsome you are." I pouted.

Disbelief crossed his expression before he chuckled. "Prim..."

"I said sorry." My face heated.

"It's fine. At least this way I have carved out time to spend with you." He squeezed my hand again before letting go. "After we dissected that incident with manipulating fire you had, can you explain why you lost control?"

I nodded. This part I had been actively engaged in. "I wasn't focused fully on the flames. I'd been distracted by something."

"And why do you need to focus on the flames?"

"Because it's fire magic. Fire is a selfish element that needs total focus on it," I repeated, remembering the analogy he'd taught me verbatim because it was funny to think of an element being selfish.

"At least you were listening a bit." He flashed me his teeth in a wide smile. "Let's try again. Okay?"

"Sure." I nodded, readying my hands.

We'd practiced a few times, but I kept catching things on fire, which was how I got a lecture.

He held his palm out. "Conjure flames."

Red and orange flames flickered to life on the palm of his hand.

"Manipulate flames," I murmured, willing the flames into a small heart as my MANA decreased rapidly.

But this time, I didn't focus on the draining of MANA or the weakness in my bones. I focused on the heat of the fire and shaping it to my will.

I balled my hands into fists, and Al placed his other hand over the heart, snuffing out the flames. "Great job, Prim! That's what I've been waiting for!"

Exhaling a long breath, I rubbed my eyes with the balls of my hands. "My MANA is almost depleted."

"Fire magic—"

"Costs more MANA," I interrupted. "I know."

"So you have been listening to me," he mused. "I've been meaning to ask, what do you want to do after graduation?"

I dropped my arms on the desk and drummed my fingers against the wooden desk that was tucked away in the corner of the library on the third floor. "I'm honestly not sure. What are you wanting to do?"

"Wanting and doing are two entirely different things." His smile fell, and his gaze dropped to the table where my fingers hit the surface. "I'll be taking over Magic Company in the future as the CEO." I *hated* the despair lingering within his tone.

"What even is Magic Company? Why is it a big deal?"

"They were right." The corner of his lip curled into a frown. "You are lacking a lot of basic knowledge about the world."

I shifted in my seat, but I didn't reply.

What could I say?

Yeah, I'm ignorant to the magic system and the everyday knowledge of this world because I'm reincarnated from a world with taxes and mental stress on the daily.

No, thanks.

He sighed. "Magic Company is a corporation run by my parents. It employs millions of people to research, create, and upgrade innovative magical and technological items."

“Woah.” My brows quirked as the comforting scent of the library quelled my anxiety. “That’s kind of intense.”

“It is.”

“What do you *want* to do after graduation?”

His jaw ticked as he shrugged. “I like research, but believe it or not, educating is my preferred occupation.”

“You want to teach?”

That was kind of perfect. Al would’ve made more sense as a professor here than Cyrus did now that I knew teaching wasn’t something Cyrus did because he enjoyed it. Al would’ve enjoyed it, though.

“I’d love seeing you as the water professor here,” I said along with a dreamy sigh.

He gasped, pressing a hand over his chest. “And put your other boyfriend out of a job? What would he think of that?”

I slipped out of my chair and into the one next to him before leaning close and inhaling his overwhelming autumn scent. The nutmeg smelled more potent today. “Cyrus isn’t a big fan of teaching. It’s his first and last year here. You might want to think about applying.”

His pupils dilated, and his body went stiff. “Cyrus had taken over water my second term. It’s weird to think he wouldn’t like his job. It’s a huge statement to be employed here just like attending is for students.”

“It’s not that he doesn’t like it.” I moved back. “It’s just not his passion like it is yours.”

“Too bad my parents would lose their minds.” His expression turned cold. “I’m already one indiscretion away from being disowned.”

“Because of me?” My heart plummeted. “Al, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” He leaned forward, and his breath fanned over my face. “I wouldn’t change us for the world, let alone my parents. If they can’t accept us, so be it. All I want is you.”

“I want you, Al.” I touched my lips to his in a soft kiss. “But you should have this same enthusiasm about your dreams. If you want to teach, teach. It’s not your responsibility to take over your parents’ dreams.”

His heart-o-meter increased. “If only it were that easy.”

His lips descended on mine with a desperate plea, and I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck. I wanted to lose myself in Al.

The only time he relaxed was when he was kissing me, or we were in each other’s arms. I wanted to break his walls down and force him to relax for once.

He cupped my face and angled my head to deepen the kiss.

I moaned into his mouth as heat snaked through me.

“I hate to interrupt,” a familiar voice spoke.

Surprise rattled through me, and Al and I jumped apart to stare at his freaking Vice President. He’d had a knack for interrupting us.

I had a feeling he interrupted almost everything Al did.

Annoyance rang in my head as I caught my breath and glared at the man.

“What do you want, Harold?” Al practically growled at him.

“I thought you allocated this time for studying?” Harold asked, a slight warning in his tone. “Locking lips with your girlfriend isn’t that. Should Professor Shades be aware that you’re incapable of teaching her?”

“Al *is* teaching me,” I snapped at the asshole. “Kissing breaks are technically brain breaks, and brain breaks are good for studying.”

Harold blinked slowly at me, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“Careful threatening me.” Al shot him a deadly glare. “I have more information about your...extracurriculars, than I care to have. Now, what do you need?”

Harold swept his hand through his brown hair and let out a nervous chuckle. “My apologies, Alderidge, but the council is in an uproar. The opposing academy for the MANA ball game this weekend has been canceled. We have two other teams wanting to take their place, but we can’t decide which because our council has siblings at each academy that play the game.”

Al stood from his seat and glowered at the guy. “You’re the Vice President, Harold. It’s your call. Tell them which team and make the preparations.”

“My brother plays in one of the academies. I figured I’d be biased.” He frowned, flicking his gaze to me.

“I don’t care if you’re biased. Your job is to make sure the game goes smoothly.” Al gritted his teeth, and his jaw muscles bunched.

I practically felt his irritation wash over me. His Vice President didn’t know how to do anything it seemed.

What was the point in having one at all?

“Sorry, but they don’t want to listen to me.”

Gods, his voice was whiney.

Al sent him a scathing look, making him hunch his shoulders, before looking at me with an apologetic expression. “Care if we cut this session short?”

I shook my head and got to my feet. “Not at all. That’s probably for the best. My MANA is so low.”

He chuckled, gripping my chin and tilting my head up before pressing a longing kiss to my lips. “I’ll see you later.”

“See you later.” I pressed up on my tiptoes to kiss him once more.

Harold, wisely, kept his mouth shut as he followed Al out of the library.

“I need coffee,” I muttered to myself, shoving my textbook into my bag and hoisting it over my shoulder.

I grabbed my phone and sent a text to my one boyfriend who actually enjoyed coffee as much as I did, though I was

slowly converting Colt with chocolate coffees.

PRIMROSE

Coffee date in the Academy Center's cafe? My MANA is so low, I'm barely keeping my eyes open.

RAIDEN

Alderidge is making you work, hmm? At least you're getting some fire practice in. I know you try avoiding it.

My mouth fell open from his teasing, but before I could reply, another text came through.

RAIDEN

I'm already here, little rose. I'll get your order.

PRIMROSE

Vanilla latte?

RAIDEN

I know what my girlfriend likes. Come meet me at our spot.

Happiness surged through me. Raiden was so thoughtful, and I loved our coffee dates.

I quickly deposited my phone in my bag and high-tailed it to the cafe.



THE SCENTS OF VARIOUS COFFEES FILLED MY NOSE, AND I hummed in excitement as I caught sight of Raiden in our

official spot at the table next to a window, holding his espresso.

My latte sat in front of him, and I beelined over to my chair and sat down before grabbing the precious liquid of the gods and taking a careful sip. I moaned as the flavor exploded on my tongue.

He groaned, tilting his head back. “Fuck, I miss that sound.”

My cheeks flamed with heat, and I shot him a flirty smile. “We should do something about that.”

“We definitely should,” he agreed with a smirk, taking a drink of his own. “How was the tutoring session?”

“Great until *Vice President Harold* interrupted per usual. Why does that guy always have to run to Al for help about petty shit? It’s not even serious stuff! Oh, Al, please make the rest of the council listen to me,” I mocked the jerky vice president.

Raiden snorted a laugh. “Why doesn’t Alderidge just make the guy do his job?”

“Because he’s afraid he’ll mess it up, I guess.” I frowned, taking another sip before catching sight of Caryn and her mean girl crew coming over. “Mean girl alert.”

“*Great.*” He poked his tongue lightly against his cheek and inhaled a long breath.

“Well if it isn’t the sluttiest student at this elite academy,” Caryn snarked as she stopped in front of our table, crossing her arms.

“Weren’t you *just* in the library with Alderidge? Poor guy.” Chelsea frowned.

“They should really expel scum like you.” Dana sneered down at us.

“Stalking me, now, hmm?” I raised a brow at her.

Her face went red. “Why would we waste our time stalking you?”

“Why do you care so much about what I do then? This is getting ridiculous, Caryn.” I expelled a breath. “Just let me drink my latte.”

She turned to Dana with a scowl, but then there was a smirk pulling at her lips. “They could never expel an *orphan*, Dana. MANA Sim Academy is too elite for such behavior.”

Raiden sucked in a shocked breath. “Primrose.”

“I’m not an orphan!” I gaped at her, setting my latte down.

Who bullied someone for something like that?

“That’s not what your file said.” Her smirk grew. “No wonder you’re with so many guys. You have both mommy *and* daddy issues.”

A tendril of panic seized my chest as reality slammed into me, making my heart pound hard against my rib cage. I was reincarnated into this world at the age I was now. I didn’t technically grow up here, which also meant I wasn’t born and didn’t have parents.

I pressed my lips into a thin line and stood up on wobbly legs. “You should feel so freaking proud of yourself, Caryn.”

We’d already attracted a crowd that was being entertained by our interaction like a B-rated movie.

She grinned. “I know.”

“For what?” Chelsea asked in a whisper.

“For picking on someone because they don’t have parents,” I stated monotoned, glaring at Caryn with a scathing look. “That’s the sickest thing I’ve ever been told.”

Raiden stood up and wrapped an arm around my waist, tugging me to his side. “Let’s go, little rose. You don’t have to stay and listen to this.”

“Can we go to your dorm?” I croaked the question as we turned and left them behind.

He hesitated, opening the door out of the Academy Center for me. “Why not yours?”

“I want to go to yours.” I walked through the door with him.

We made it all the way to his dorm room door before HEART EVENT TRIGGERED flashed above Raiden’s head.

“Are you sure you want to come in?” His voice was low, concerned.

I nodded, resting my hand on the door. “Yes. Are you okay with that?”

“I have the room to myself. I don’t have a roommate,” he explained.

“You’ve told me that before.” I furrowed my brows, letting my hand drop. “Your dad paid extra for it.”

“Because he knows I’m different.” He ducked his head in what I thought was shame.

“Raiden.” I stepped forward and looked up at him. “I like you for you. Nothing you have in your room is going to deter me.”

He let out a shaky breath and gave me a jerky nod. “Okay, but you need to know that I’ve been obsessed with you for a long time.”

“So you say,” I teased.

“Little rose.” He leveled me with a serious look before unlocking the door and opening it for me to go inside.

I stepped forward and entered his room and was overwhelmed by the amount of black. The entire room was dark, and the only splashes of color were photographs taped to the wall.

Photographs of *me* covered his wall. There were photos of me on the first day before I’d actually met him and photos of me from last night, sleeping.

A hot flush of desire worked through me, and I turned toward Raiden as he locked the door with a soft *click*. “You’ve been watching me, even when I don’t know it.”

“You’re the most stunning human I’ve ever seen, and I can’t stop watching you, little rose. I have issues with obsessing over things, usually animals.” He stalked toward me. “I’ll photograph them for a few weeks. But with you...it’s different. I want to watch you constantly, and I do. I don’t see myself stopping any time soon.”

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat, and I glanced at the wall of myself again. “To be desired like this...”

“Is repulsive?” he guessed, staring down at me.

I turned and angled my head up to meet his purple gaze. “It’s empowering.”

Surprise engulfed his expression. “What?”

Heat pooled in my abdomen, and I reached up to grab the back of his head and tugged him to me. “I like it, Raiden.”

“You do?” he rasped with the cutest confused expression.

“Yes.” I pulled him closer until his lips melted against mine, sparking a deep need inside of me. “I love it.”

He moaned into my mouth, and he gripped my hips and lifted me up for me to wrap my legs around his waist. I kissed the life out of him as he walked us toward his bed and fell on top of me.

Pulling back, he groaned as he stared at me and reached for the camera on his nightstand before snapping a few shots. “Seeing you look at me with that expression makes me ache, little rose.”

“Do something about it then, please,” I begged him.

His body trembled, and he set the camera down. “Is that really okay? After you’ve found out my secret? After you’ve seen my obsession for you plastered all over my wall the same way you are in my heart?”

“Raiden, please.” I ran my hand under his shirt, and he helped me tug it off him. “I want you, even after seeing this.” I unbuckled his pants and helped him push them off. “Seeing how much you want me just makes me want you.” I teased my

fingers under the waistband of his boxers before pulling them down, and his cock sprang free.

It was freaking *magnificent*.

He was long and thick, erect and weeping already.

I bent forward and licked the tip before taking him in my mouth fully, and he moaned.

“Gods, little rose.” His moans of enjoyment were music to my ears as I bobbed my head up and down, but too soon, he tangled his fingers in my hair and jerked me off his cock with a *pop*. “I need you naked. I’ve *dreamed* of you so many times.”

My tongue rolled over my lip as I nodded. “I need you, Raiden.”

In a hazy blur, he helped undress me until I was bare with him on top, positioned between my legs.

“As cheesy as it sounds, you’re even better than my dreams, little rose.” His hand ran down my neck to my chest as he stared at my body before carefully lowering himself down on me.

My arms wrapped around his neck as he pushed inside, stretching me with a searing fire that made my back arch and a whimper pull from my throat.

New life meant a new hymen.

His eyes rolled back into his head. “Why are you so tight?”

“Probably because I’m a virgin,” I blurted jokingly, but his entire body stiffened.

“What?”

“It’s okay,” I assured him, angling my hips up to encourage him to continue.

“That’s what I’m supposed to tell you.” He slumped down, resting his forehead against mine. “Are you sure this is okay?”

“It’s more than okay,” I repeated, pulling him in for another kiss to show him just how okay with this I was.

My pussy was drowning him already. It was pretty obvious I wanted him.

He swallowed my moans with an obsessive kiss, tongue winding around mine as I took him until he bottomed out. “Fuck, you’re so good at taking me.”

I was pulling him in, and the sound of wetness filled the room as he fucked me.

His strokes were firm and calculated, ricocheting pleasure through my bones.

“Did you just get wetter?” His hips drove his cock into me over and over again. “Good girl, little rose,” he gasped.

I was a writhing mess below him, moving with each delicious thrust he gave me. My legs wrapped around his waist, and my fingers brushed over raised flesh on his spine that caused us both to freeze.

“Raider, what’s—”

“Don’t.” His hand wrapped around my throat, and his thumb pressed against my jawline, turning my head to the side with gentle force. “Please, don’t.”

“Okay, okay. Just look at me, sweetheart. Don’t stop.” Turning my head toward him, I took his thumb in my mouth and sucked.

“I won’t stop until you’re coming around me,” he groaned, pulling his thumb from my mouth, gathering my wrists, and pinning my hands above my head.

He picked himself up off me a bit before fucking me faster and harder like he was chasing away the fact I’d felt something on his back.

My body was soon helpless to his raw assault of pure ecstasy, and the build up in my core was pushed to explode.

“Raider!” Colors burst behind my eyes, and my muscles convulsed as the wave of pleasure rippled through me.

“That’s it, little rose,” he moaned, his body stiffening as my pussy clenched around him, pushing him to his climax

with me. “You’re such a good girl for me.”

The praise kept my orgasm coming until he’d emptied himself inside of me and sucked in a deep breath before pulling out. A warm gush followed behind him.

He wasted no time grabbing a towel from the side of his bed and wiping us both up. He turned to toss the soiled towel into the laundry basket, and I couldn’t contain my sharp gasp.

The length of Raiden’s spine was scarred with a raised white line, stark against the fleshy-colored skin around it. It was the aftermath of what had to be intentional physical abuse.

My stomach rolled as I thought about how excruciating that would’ve been to endure, and the fact that my sweet Raiden had to go through it made rage boil deep inside of me. “What happened?”

His shoulders bunched up, and he pulled a shirt and boxers on. “Do you want one of my shirts?”

“Yes, please,” I mumbled and tugged his shirt over my head the next moment.

He crawled into bed beside me, and I moved over and rested my head on his chest. His hesitation only lasted a moment before he held me tighter and started playing with my hair.

“Because of my father’s wealth and political power, he believes we need to maintain a united front, keeping up appearances and ensuring nothing besmirches the family name... I made the mistake of telling him I didn’t want to take over the business in front of his business associates.” He flinched at the memory. “He made sure I never did that again with a hot fire poker down the length of my spine. I got the message loud and clear.”

“Your father...” Fury spurred to life in my gut at the man who had feigned kindness at the Gala with me. “I’ll kill him.”

He chuckled bitterly, pulling me even closer. “Now that’s a thought. Father has always been abusive.”

“What about your mother?” I asked before nuzzling against his chest. “You don’t have to answer that if it pains you.”

“She had only half of the first heart on the heart-o-meter with my father. But they were drinking, and he wasn’t wearing protection which resulted in me,” he explained, and my heart dropped. “She left me with him because she had no interest in becoming a mom. A maid raised me as part of her job, but I never was close with her.”

“I’m sorry,” I rasped. “You didn’t deserve that, Raiden. Your father is a disgusting excuse for a human...it’ll be difficult to keep my mouth shut around him now.”

“I love you, little rose,” he murmured.

My heart swelled as I tilted my head back and saw the glistening of emotions swirling in his gaze. Above his head, the heart-o-meter filled the last heart, and the entire meter glowed brightly as it maxed out.

Without a doubt, I knew how I felt about him. “I love you, Raiden.”

He bent down and kissed me. This kiss wasn’t as demanding as it was when he made love to me. This kiss was tender and careful as if he were afraid I would disappear.

Why would I when his cum was still between my legs?

He pulled back and smiled at me. “I can’t believe you’re mine.”

“I’m yours, Raiden. And you’re mine.” I bit my lip and stared at him. “Um, so, you mentioned *protection*, though, and you didn’t use a condom.”

His expression morphed into confusion. “A what?”

Panic started to claw up my throat. “The latex sleeve on your cock that stops your cum from entering me and impregnating me?”

“That doesn’t exist.” He tilted his head before holding up his hand, flashing a purple gemstone ring at me. “But...I *was* wearing protection.”

“How is *that* protection?” My voice went up an octave.

How had I forgotten a condom so irresponsibly? I’d just gotten to this world. I didn’t want to become a mom without living my life yet! My head whooshed as my *very* short life flashed in front of me.

“It’s a pregnancy prevention charmed ring. All men are gifted one when they come of age, and we only take it off when we get married and decide to have children with our spouses.” He blinked slowly.

“That setup is seriously like a dream.” I stared at the ring, surprised I hadn’t noticed it before. A hint of disbelief flowed through me. This was way too good to be true. “So women don’t use birth control? I don’t have to take a pill and deal with hormone issues?”

“No. It’s a man’s job.” His brows creased. “Talk to me, little rose.” He started playing with my hair again. “Why do you seem to know so little about the world?”

Now that I thought about it, the rest of my men wore a similar ring. Everything about this world seemed too good to be true.

I pressed my face against his chest more and inhaled his black raspberry scent that now covered me. “Maybe it’s because I’m not from this world.”

My words were muffled, but I had no doubt he’d heard me.

“Not from this world?” His words filled the void of the room just before frantic knocks hit the door.

“Raiden! Is Primrose with you?” Tate’s voice was panicked.

“Open the door!” Colt shouted, the door vibrating from the knocks.

“If you’re going to explain what you just told me, you might as well explain with those two here, too.” Raiden slipped out of bed and went to open the door.

I burrowed deeper into his bed as the door opened and they came inside firing off questions.

“Why haven’t you answered your phone?” Tate asked, worry clear in his tone.

“We’ve all tried to reach you,” Colt explained but stopped short as I glanced over at them.

Matching smirks spread onto their faces.

“So that’s why, she was busy,” Colt teased.

“It also means she’s free game now.” Tate chuckled, running a hand through his hair.

“Though, it’s totally unfair that Raiden keeps winning your affections first.” Colt pouted playfully.

“Sorry,” Raiden said without truly meaning it and slipped into bed with me.

Colt and Tate glanced at each other and fought their way to the bed, arms flailing and legs kicking.

Tate won the spot next to me with a victorious cheer, and Colt groaned, flopping on the other side of Tate.

“Why were you so urgently knocking?” Raiden put an arm around me.

“We heard about the argument with Caryn.” Tate scowled, putting his hand on my thigh.

“How?” I furrowed my brows.

“We unfortunately ran into her,” Colt informed me. “I’m sure it wasn’t entirely accurate, but she said something about you, um...”

“Lacking parents,” Tate murmured.

Concern was in both of their gazes.

“Mom was with us,” Colt mumbled. “She’s insisting on taking you to lunch tomorrow.”

Butterflies filled my stomach at the thought of sitting down for lunch with my boyfriend’s mom, but I nodded. “Okay.”

“The lack of parents *could* be because she’s not from our world,” Raiden brought up quietly.

Colt and Tate chuckled, but they stopped when they realized we were not laughing.

“What do you mean, pretty girl?” Colt leaned over to get a better look at me.

“I’m not from this world,” I blurted, feeling the heavy weight lift from my shoulders. “I woke up the first day of classes, and that’s all I remember. Leaf knows about it. She explained that I’d died of an aneurysm in my old world, but the gods gave me a second chance here.”

The three of them gasped, disbelief blooming in their expressions, but I continued.

“I thought I’d woken up inside one of my video games—dating simulations.” I cleared my throat. “I can’t remember much about my past life, but I do remember the game. Hearts Pursuit. It was a dating simulation with six love interests, and I used to get so mad the main character couldn’t end up with all of them,” I mused softly. “This world is exactly like the game, minus who my love interests are. But the academy, magic system, and the game-like aspects like MANA, XP, and heart-o-meters are all eerily similar.”

I paused, but they just kept gaping at me, so I continued, “Leaf thinks it’s because someone in my old world caught a glimpse of this one or maybe came from it, so they designed a video game similar to it.”

“Are you fucking with us?” Tate asked with a sharp exhale.

“No.”

“It explains why she really doesn’t know much about our world.” Colt frowned. “A video game with this world would make you familiar with it, but there’s a wealth of info usually missing in games about world building—well, specifically in dating simulations.”

“That’s right.” I nodded, a thick lump tight in my throat.

“She didn’t know about the pregnancy protection rings,” Raiden murmured.

Colt and Tate raised their hands to show off their rings with different colored gemstones.

They matched the colors of their eyes. Colt's was green, and Tate's was blue.

"The gemstones are infused with our MANA," Colt explained. "That's how it works."

"Did you think this was a game when you first came?" Tate asked, no judgment in his gaze. Simply curiosity, and it was the same for Colt and Raiden.

I nodded with a shaky breath. "I did, but then everything became *so* real. My feelings for all of you proved that it wasn't a game."

"Have you told the other guys yet?" Colt asked.

I shook my head. "No, but I want to be the one to explain it."

"Of course," Tate agreed.

"They should hear it from you." Raiden leaned down and kissed my head.

"They will." My heart was beating erratically in my chest.

Had they really just taken it in stride like that?

"So, pretty girl, if we were in a video game, what would be our archetypes?" Colt leaned back and folded his arms behind his head.

A small laugh bubbled out of me at the question. "*You* would be the golden retriever character."

"What about me?" Tate started drawing circles on my thigh with his finger.

"Flirty jock," I answered without missing a beat.

Colt howled with laughter, and even Raiden chuckled.

Tate shrugged. "Can't argue with that, babe."

"Raiden would be the quiet but obsessed type, obviously." I waved my hand toward the photos of me on his wall.

“Oh, shit,” Tate yelled, glancing at it.

Raiden tensed. “She’s everything to me.”

Colt sat up and looked at them before zeroing in on one of me sleeping on Colt’s chest. “These are good. Can you make copies?”

“Yes.” Raiden dipped his head into my neck and breathed.

“I want some, too,” Tate whined, doing the same thing.

“Don’t leave me out!” Colt crawled over Tate and onto me, lying between my legs and on my stomach.

His hand swept over my sore and bare pussy on accident as he got comfortable, and I moaned.

“You’re soaked, pretty girl.” Colt’s gaze was full of desire, but Raiden whacked his shoulder.

“From me, and she’s sore,” he scolded. “Let our girl rest. She was a virgin.”

“You were?” Tate whipped his head up.

“Yes.” I leaned back against the pillow and shut my eyes. “I was reincarnated, remember?”

“New life, new hymen, right?” Colt asked with a chuckle.

“I thought the same exact thing,” I giggled before Tate’s lips descended upon mine.

“I can’t wait for it to be my turn.” His voice was husky with desire as he pulled back.

Colt moved up and kissed me carefully. “And mine.” He moved back and rested his head on my chest.

“But you need rest, little rose,” Raiden told me, and I drifted off to sleep surrounded by my three boyfriends who finally knew the truth about me.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

COLT

“She already loves you,” I chuckled as I watched Primrose run around her dorm room in an effort to make sure she was presentable to meet Mom.

Her words, not mine. She was perfect as is, and she’d already met her and seen her frequently in class.

I didn’t understand her hang up. Mom loved her already, and so did I.

I’ve loved her since the moment I saw her, but dropping the L bomb too early was a recipe for disaster.

But how could I not love her? She was so adorable. She wore a pink dress that was flowy and hit her mid-thigh with a scoop neck that showed off the swell of her breasts that I loved and couldn’t stop staring at even though I was a gentleman. Her hair was in loose pigtails, and she sported pink lip gloss.

Leaf swirled her hand, and flowers bloomed in the loose blonde braids Primrose had done on each side of her head. “There. Presentable. Now, go have fun but do *not* hit on her son in front of her, and you’ll do just fine.”

“*Not* hit on me?” I gasped in horror at Leaf. “I thought you were on my side!”

She shrugged. “If you want your mom to know you’re dating an aggressive woman, go for it.”

“I am *not* an aggressive woman, Leaf!” Primrose put her hands on her hips and glared at her leafy roommate who was lounging on her bed, reading some magazine.

“I’ve seen you smack their butts without prompt. You even touched poor Alderidge’s on the first day.” She lazily lifted her eyes to Primrose. “You’re aggressive with them, and you clearly have a butt thing.”

“I am *not!* And I don’t have a butt thing!” She threw her head back and whined.

“You kind of do, pretty girl.” I ran a hand through my hair.

Her hand shot out and smacked my butt without warning, and disbelief crossed her features. She hadn’t meant to.

“Told ya.” Leaf sighed, going back to her magazine. “Aggressive with a butt thing.”

I howled with laughter, doubling over and choking on a breath. “I don’t mind! I actually love the way you show affection,” I tried assuring her between gasps of air.

Her face was red as she pouted her glossy lips. “I suppose I’m ready, then.”

I straightened and bent down to kiss her, but she pressed her palm to my lips. “Nu-uh. My lip gloss is perfect, and I want to spend time with your mom while my lip gloss isn’t on her son.”

“I don’t mind.” I moved her hand and flashed her a pleading smile.

She pulled her hand back. “Maybe after. If it goes well.”

“Don’t worry, pretty girl. It’ll go well.” I looped my arm through hers and waved bye to Leaf before taking my anxiety-ridden girlfriend to lunch with my mom.



MOM SAT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FANCY RESTAURANT WITH A bright smile on her face, eyes zeroed in on Primrose. “Finally!”

She zipped toward Primrose and pulled her into a hug, excitement brimming from her and effectively calming my girlfriend’s nerves.

Gods, I loved calling her that.

Mom pulled her into the seat next to her, and I sat across from Primrose.

“Colt’s told me so much about you. I want to make it clear that I’m a cool mom, and I’m totally cool with you dating more men than just my son so long as you’re serious about it.” She folded her hands in front of her and smiled at Primrose. “Since you *are* dating my son, I’m basically a bonus mom to you now, or a mom. Whatever. Point is, consider me a mother figure for you now.”

“Mom,” I whispered harshly, but she waved me off.

“Thank you, Professor Zinman, but—”

“Please, call me Diane,” she interrupted.

“Colt mentioned you heard about my lack of parents.” I sighed.

“I did, but we don’t have to go into much detail. I just want you to know that you’re not alone.” Her comforting smile grew. “Certainly not now that you and Colt are together.”

“Thank you, Diane.” Primrose squirmed in her seat, staring at me with her pretty green eyes.

“No thanks needed.” Mom paused as the waitress took our orders and left. It didn’t take long for her to bring our drinks over.

“So, Colt told me you were a fan of video games like him.”

“Ah, yeah.” Primrose smiled, taking a sip of her soda. “I really like games.”

“We’re going to hang out at the dorm and have a video game night.” Excitement bubbled up in me at having a gaming night with Primrose.

“There’s a new zombie game out,” Primrose gushed. “We’re going to team up and take out a horde. The entire game is based on the zombie apocalypse at an island resort.”

We'd been trying to organize the game night for a while, but the timing never worked out. Her juggling all of us definitely was more of a challenge than we'd imagined, but that just meant we all usually hung out together.

"That sounds lovely." Mom smiled, sending me a knowing look. "Colt's always been a gamer. I'm glad you share that."

"Definitely."

"You've been doing a great job with water magic. Ever since Rowe gave your assignments to me, I've been impressed."

Primrose blushed. "Thanks, and thanks for agreeing to look over my work so that Cyrus and I could see each other without it affecting my studies."

Mom laughed. "Any time! You've got quite a variety of boyfriends, Primrose. I've only got the one husband, but I'll keep him, I guess."

"Mom!" I ran a hand over my face.

"What? I love your dad!" She cackled. "Oh, Primrose, you must come to a family dinner soon. You'll love my husband and Colt's younger brother, Cole. Though, they fight like cats and dogs."

"More like bunnies and wolves," Colt muttered under his breath.

"Speaking of bunnies, Colt said that Cotton loves you!" Mom grabbed her drink and took a few sips. "That rabbit is a vicious little guy. It's amazing he let you hold him!"

"He's the sweetest little bunny," Primrose defended my bunny without a second thought, and pride welled in my chest.

My parents loved my bunnies, but my bunnies weren't as fond of them.

"Oh, you and Colt sound just alike." Mom was like a bundle of energy, talkative and excited. She'd been dying to go out to lunch with Primrose, and I'm glad we were finally able to.

When she'd heard Primrose had no parents, her heart broke and she'd practically vowed to adopt her—not that I minded. I planned to marry that woman.

Even if she wasn't from this world.

When she'd told us, it actually made a lot of sense. It was odd that she was reincarnated without being born, but who was I to question the gods?

The waitress dropped off our meals and left.

“Finals are next week,” Mom brought up, swirling her pasta on her fork. “Are you both prepared?”

“I'll crush them.” I cut into the steak I'd ordered and shoved a piece into my mouth, loving the explosion of flavor.

“Manners,” Mom scolded with a soft sigh before glancing at Primrose.

Primrose finished chewing a bite of her pasta. “I'm confident that I'll pass now that I have Alderidge tutoring me on fire magic. Fire is a little *too* chaotic for me. It's difficult for me to focus long enough to control.”

“I did hear about the mishap in Fire Basics.” She nodded with a glance toward me. “Thankfully, Colt and the others were there. Don't worry, though. Believe it or not, clothes being burned off is not a new thing. Professor Shades takes those incidents in stride by now.”

“That actually makes me feel a lot better.” Primrose let out a hefty sigh of relief.

“What're your plans for after graduation?” Mom smiled at her. “Colt's wanting to follow in his Dad's footsteps and pursue a path in pharmaceuticals. Magic certainly helps with the creation of medicine.”

She whipped her head toward me with surprise etched onto her face. “I didn't know that.”

“I haven't said,” I replied easily, setting down my fork to take a drink. “It's fun to make something that can help others. Especially when I can use magic to help. My dad always talked about it growing up, and he's shown me how to make a

basic pain reliever with ingredients found in the forest out where we live.”

“Cole is going to be on the same path,” Mom mused. “I tried to get them to get interested in teaching like me, but it wasn’t their calling.”

“What about you, pretty girl?” I licked my lips. “Do you have any idea yet?”

“Not yet,” she murmured, glancing down at her plate. “Magic is incredible, but I have no idea what I want to do with it yet.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Mom assured her. “Give it time and look into your options.”

“Thanks, Diane.” Primrose glanced up at Mom through her eyelashes, and happiness surged through me at the acceptance in her gaze.

I knew Mom and her would get along, and Primrose needed an older maternal figure if she was anything like me. Mom was the best there was, and she clearly loved Primrose just as much as I did.

I couldn’t wait to tell her as much.

PRIMROSE

“I love your mom.” I sighed happily as I kicked off my shoes and sank down on Colt’s bed.

He had been right, his mom was truly amazing. She was everything I wished I had in a mom. She didn’t care about our relationship dynamics, and she was so welcoming.

An ache spread across my chest at the thought, but I didn’t have a mom at all.

“She’s practically adopted my girlfriend.” He flopped onto the bed next to me, and I bounced. “That’s not weird, right?”

“Totally not weird.” I giggled, turning and expecting a kiss.

Instead, he held up his handheld gaming console with a mischievous grin. “Zombies?”

“Of course!” I grinned wildly, launching off his bed and digging into my bag to retrieve the console he’d given me that I packed for this very reason.

“I’m so excited about this game.” I slipped my fingers into my braids and worked them out before tossing my hair up in a messy bun. “Everyone’s been talking about it.”

“I know!” His gaze was glued to my chest as I moved around, not that I could blame him. The flowing dress had a scoop neck, and it showed off my boobs so that every step I took, they bounced. Plus, it was comfy.

The dress was a win in many ways.

“Before we delve into the game...” I dug back into my bag and snagged a treat I’d bought earlier for Cotton and gave it to the little guy as if it were an offering.

His nose twitched lovingly as he accepted it.

“You’re the best woman in the world,” Colt stated with no room for argument.

I dove back into his bed where I swear I wanted to just live out the rest of my days because it smelled of bamboo, coconut, and *Colt*.

“And you’re one of the six best boyfriends in the world.”

“No favorites, huh?” His lips twitched with amusement.

“I couldn’t. You’re all amazing in different ways. Wouldn’t change it for the world, though.”

The next few hours were dedicated strictly to the game, and we only moved from our positions for a snack and a bathroom break.

We *finally* reached the halfway mark, signaled by the characters finding a new yacht docked at the resort that hadn’t been there when the game started. Cue the part where they would find out that the surviving humans were normally *worse* than the zombies.

“Gods, I love this game,” I muttered, cleaving a zombie’s head clean off with glee just before Colt paused the game.

I paused mine since we were playing multiplayer, and I glanced over. “What is it? Did you not make it over the dock?”

“I love you, pretty girl,” he mumbled, console discarded somewhere other than in his hands. Sincerity shone brightly in his green eyes, and the way his blond hair lay lazily on top of his head sent butterflies swarming through me. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. For so many reasons.”

“Colt...” My heart swelled with love for the man in front of me as I switched off the console and set it somewhere on the bed beside me. “I love you, too. So much.”

He surged forward so fast I barely saw his heart-o-meter max out as he rolled on top of me and barricaded me underneath him. I loved being the focus of his attention, and with Colt, I always was.

A delicious shudder shot through my body as his mouth covered mine. I melted underneath him, content to stay here, his lips working mine and his body on mine until the end of time.

He broke the kiss and dipped his head down, nuzzling my neck and peppering kisses down my collarbone. Kiss after kiss, he ravaged me, tearing at my clothes and his own until we were both naked and tangled together in his bed.

“You’re more perfect than I could ever imagine.” He pulled up, balancing on his hands and looking down between us with an uncensored breathy moan. “These are *amazing*.” He traced his fingertips up my side and cupped my breast. His thumb rubbed over my nipple, sending licks of electricity through my veins.

“Mmph.” My back bowed off the mattress as my nipples hardened under his touch.

His cock brushed against my thigh, but nowhere near where I needed it as he slid down and kissed his way down to my breasts.

“So perfect.” One hand molded my breast, flicking my nipple, and his hot mouth latched onto the other and sucked.

“Colt!” A sharp gasp escaped me as a blistering sensation of need built inside me.

“Perfect, pretty girl. Just *perfect*.” He pulled up to look at me as he moved downward, eyes glittering with dark desire that seemed almost misplaced on my sweet Colt.

He carefully spread my thighs, and his fingers stroked me, firm and with intent. “You just keep getting better, pretty girl.” His mouth covered my pussy, and his tongue plunged inside, sweeping ricochets of pleasure through me.

My legs wound around his head, and my hands tangled in his hair. “Your mouth is amazing, oh my gods!”

I felt him smile against me before he nipped at my clit. Jolts of ecstasy slammed into me, and he ate me out until tears gathered in my eyes.

He pulled back just before I lost control, and he made a show of licking his lips. “Delicious, pretty girl.”

I tugged him up by his hair and slipped my tongue in his mouth in a blistering kiss as I flipped him over and kissed down his chest.

My gaze widened as I came face-to-head with his cock. His very impressive, thick cock. My pussy ached at the sight. He’d stretch me out with just how wide he was.

Licking my lips, I glanced up at him, desire pooling in my abdomen as I met his heated gaze. “I love you, Colt.”

“I love yo—” His words turned into a strangled cry as I licked a strip up the bottom of his shaft, my fingers circling around his throbbing erection.

“Fuck, pretty girl. I love you so much!” He rushed the words out as I opened wide enough to slide his cock in my mouth.

Lowering my head, I bobbed up and down to take him deeper with every motion. He hit the back of my throat, and I gagged on him before refusing to quit and taking him deeper.

Fuck you, gag reflex.

“You look so perfect with my dick in your pretty mouth.” His hips bucked, and his hands tangled in my hair.

I hummed around his cock, licking and sucking until his hips started to slow, and I popped off him.

“Please,” he begged, desperation etched on his expression as he tugged me to him and sealed his lips over mine in a breathtaking kiss. “You’re killing me, pretty girl. I need to feel you.”

“You felt my mouth,” I mused against his lips as I pushed him back and straddled him. “Do you need to feel my pussy?”

“Gods, yes,” he breathed, settling his hands on my hips and guiding me onto his cock.

His tip lodged against my dripping pussy, and I lowered myself onto his cock inch by inch until he was fully seated inside me.

My head fell back, and a pleasure-filled moan escaped me.

“Oh my gods,” we breathed in sync. “You feel so good!”

I snapped my head down toward him and met his gaze before we dissolved into breathy laughter.

“Great minds...” My fingers moved up his chest teasingly before I swiveled my hips.

“Think alike,” he moaned, digging his fingers into my flesh.

My walls clenched as I rode him. Each rock of my hips built up the pressure inside of me until my body started to shake and my vision pulsed.

As I stilled, Colt picked up the pace, tilting his hips and driving his cock up into me until stars burst behind my eyelids. The pleasure rolled from me to him, and he stiffened before coming inside me.

I collapsed on top of him with a heavy breath, and he held me to him tightly. Neither of us bothered to move, and I was content to lay on him with him still inside me forever.

I freaking loved love.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

Finals blew by, and somehow, we were officially in the Intermediate level. I owed my success in passing Fire Basics to Al. Without him, I absolutely would have flunked out.

Al had been completely swamped with council duties and his own school work since he was in Advanced classes, now. But I was proud of him for keeping up with everything. Gods knew I couldn't do all that he did.

Colt had officially started to take me on every lunch he had with Diane, and I'd truly started to love that woman. She was so kind, and I could see where Colt got it from. I'd even had dinner with all of them, including meeting his dad and brother. Cole was six years younger than Colt, but they were close regardless. And it was hilarious to watch them bicker back and forth.

Cyrus had been inducted into the group chat after he'd gotten the third degree from the guys about not hurting me ever again. Cyrus had made up for everything, though. He didn't pull away from me, and I started going to his and Liza's lunches sometimes as well. Liza had been thrilled that we worked it out, and so was I.

Raiden and I were closer than ever, and I stayed the night with him often. His wall never stopped gaining new photos of me, and it was endearing. There was always a new one that I didn't remember him taking. He hadn't heard from his dad

since the gala, thankfully. I *really* hated that man after I'd found out what he did to Raiden and how he treated him.

Tate had been super busy with MANA ball practice and games, but all of his free time was spent with Colt and I. Caryn kept going to his practices and games with his number on her jersey, and both of us were sick of it.

Wells was in the thick of a new method of creating art with magic, and he wouldn't let me visit the art room because he said he needed to focus. Apparently, when I was around, he couldn't focus on what he needed. It sounded shitty, but he'd explained it in a way that made it sound like he just couldn't keep his attention off of me which was rather flattering.

The past month had progressed a lot more of my relationships into the big L zone, and I was falling in love rapidly. I already *was* in love with some of them.

But the only ones I'd told were Colt and Raiden.

I also hadn't shared my reincarnation with Wells or Al. I had blurted it to Cyrus, though. He said he figured as much, whatever that meant, and we didn't dwell on it. He was accepting, though, and I needed that.

"And that's pretty much it." Al snapped the textbook.

I jolted a bit, glancing over at him with tired eyes from all the reading. "Huh?"

His lips twitched as he tilted his head. "You weren't listening, were you?"

"Truthfully?" I rubbed the blurriness from my eyes. "You lost me at *fire is about control, but igniting the flames and keeping them...*"

"Prim, sweetheart, that was the first part of the lesson." He sighed, resting his elbows on the table and leaning closer. "What's going on with you?"

"I'm sorry, Al." I pouted, wanting to fling myself right into his arms. "A lot has been on my mind. I miss you, and I want to spend some time with you soon."

“I know.” His frown made my heart twist. “As soon as Harold does his job properly, perhaps we will be able to do more together. I don’t know why I had been against our relationship dynamics in the beginning. I love that the others can be there for you when I can’t.”

“I do, too. But just remember I need my AI time as well.” I leaned in and pecked his lips. “Colt and Tate are dragging me to an after-game party tomorrow. Raiden is coming. Even Liza, Joey, and Hal will be there. Come with?”

“I wish.” He ran a hand down his face with a groan. “Unfortunately, I’m having to go over a few things the council did and make sure everything is done right, and I have a test in a few days for Advanced Earth.”

“That’s disappointing,” I sulked with what felt like a dark cloud above my head.

“But you need to go and have fun.” He scooted closer with an encouraging smile, but I could see the exhaustion in his gaze.

“Alderidge,” Harold’s annoying voice interrupted. “The council is ready for the meeting. We’re just waiting on you.”

Al’s jaw ticked as he glanced at him. “The meeting isn’t for another hour, Harold. Read the email I sent you.”

“Right, well.” Harold pushed his glasses up, shooting me an irritated look. “Everyone is there because I may have given them the wrong time.”

“Sounds like you messed up,” I grumbled, and Al leaned in to kiss me again.

“I agree.” Al sighed and packed up his textbooks. “If I could demote you from Vice President, I’d do it. You better believe I’ll be speaking to the dean about this. This is the *fifth* week in a row of you interrupting our tutoring session and don’t get me started on midnight screw ups.”

“I’m sorry,” Harold stumbled over his words, trying to come up with an explanation.

Al kissed me once more before storming out of the library with Harold on his heels.

I *hated* that guy. He was a complete jerkwad.

Checking my phone, I realized I still had thirty minutes allotted for studying. I shot a quick text to my brooding artist.

PRIMROSE

I miss you. Can I stop by? (Winky face tongue emoji)

WELLS

I miss you, beautiful. I'm almost finished. Tomorrow?

PRIMROSE

There's a party tomorrow night after the game. Colt, Tate, and Raiden are taking me. Al can't come, and Cyrus isn't interested in it since he's a professor. (Eye roll emoji) Come with?

WELLS

Sorry, beautiful. Not really my thing. You're welcome to come to the studio after, though. I must get back to work while my muse is active. See you tomorrow?

I sighed, but I texted back.

PRIMROSE

I get it. (Heart emoji)

Stuffing my phone into my bag, I got up and scoured the poetry section before settling down with a book from C. Russ

that had a beautiful cover design of a white background and an illustrated rose.

I'd become obsessed with this author as soon as I'd read his work when I first came here.

Hearts Pursuit was his newest book, and it caught my attention since that was the name of the video game in my past life that reminded me so much of this world. There was one poem I was absolutely in love with, and I knew the gods meant for me to see it.

**In life's game, a heart's pursuit anew,
Where second chances bloom, clumsy and true,
Heart-o-meter's full in the new light,
A chance to replay fate, to make things right.
The past life, a fleeting shadow, memories fading away,
As love's embrace brings in a fuller day,
With several desires yearning to ignite,
A symphony of love interests in sight.
For new life bestows upon an improbable chance,
To play the game of romance,
Like a phoenix rising from memories of despair,
A second life to love, perfect and rare.**

The poem was my life. Plain and simple, and I felt connected to it in a way I'd never felt before. I always adored poetry. But connecting to it? I hadn't been able to like this before.

"What're you reading?" Cyrus's velvety voice settled over me, and I glanced up to see HEART EVENT TRIGGERED above his head.

"C. Russ," I gushed, closing the book with my thumb still on the page so I didn't lose my spot. "It just came out, and there's a poem in there that resonates with me like no other."

“Seriously?” His eyes widened, and he collapsed into the seat next to me. “I mean, I’m very familiar with his work. What poem resonates with you?”

“Hearts Pursuit, obviously,” I murmured, opening the book to the page and running my fingers over the words. “It’s eerily similar to my life.”

“Well, it *is* something to be taken by each reader and molded into their life,” he said, leaning back and tucking his arms behind his head.

“But this is almost *verbatim*,” I insisted, staring at the poem. “It’s like the author delved into my chest and spread my heart on the page.”

“You’re living a second life with the intent to find love?”

“Yes.” I glanced over at him, and my nose brushed his. “I told you about my reincarnation.”

He’d gotten closer as I stared at the poem, and the way he was looking at me made my heart swell with something akin to desire and need.

“You did.” He hummed. “A chance to replay fate, to make things right.” He reached over slowly and tucked my hair out of my face. “That’s what you let me do when I screwed up with you. I should’ve just pursued you from the moment I landed on top of you in this library, but I didn’t. And you’ve let me remedy that, rosebud.”

My heartbeat thudded in my chest, and an ache spread through to my core. “How could I not give you that chance? You were just stuck in your head, and I didn’t want to lose you because you needed time.”



His heart-o-meter increased to four as he leaned in and swept me up in a soul-shattering kiss. My feelings for him hummed through me, turning my brain to mush. All I could focus on was his lips against mine, hesitant but full of desire at the same time.

I had an instant attraction to Cyrus, and I loved his sister as my own. I craved Cyrus, and I craved the others, but each one was a different ache. Cyrus made me want to dive head-first

into his feelings and play show and tell. I wanted to know everything about him and why it made him the way he was. I wanted to know why he and his sister were so close and why they didn't talk about any other family. I wanted to know why he made so much sense with his words and why his presence put me at ease.

But more than anything, I wanted to know why his lips against mine, warm and oozing a deep want, made the entire library melt away.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 
COLT: 
CYRUS: 
RAIDEN: 
TATE: 
WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

I pushed the cup of juice and alcohol into Tate's hands and pressed up onto my tiptoes until my lips were plastered on his in a messy, tipsy kiss filled with what I hoped was encouragement.

His hands were hot on my hips, and his pinky fingers slipped under the jersey I had on to glide across sweaty skin.

Tate smelled like the ocean, tasted like sea salt and alcohol, and I couldn't get enough. My tongue slid against his, and I tangled my hands in his brown locks.

Even with Caryn glaring daggers at us from the other side of the spacious living room, I took comfort in the fact that Tate was *mine*.

Pulling away, we were both breathing heavily, and I rested my forehead against his. "You still did amazing, Tate!" I shouted over the booming beats of the stereo and the writhing of other students dancing to the rhythm.

"We lost, babe!" His brows creased into a frown, but I just kissed him again.

"Not by much!" Colt told him, bumping his shoulder. "Cheer up! We're at the party of the year with our girlfriend, and you still did great at playing!"

"Wasn't your fault Kevin screwed up and got crushed by the player he was supposed to be able to beat," Raiden added, standing next to me.

Tate and I stepped back from each other as a bead of sweat rolled down my spine.

“Thanks for cheering me up, guys.” Tate grinned. “But I’m captain so I should’ve figured a different play out.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed his jersey, yanking him back to me and dissolving into another kiss before breaking it. “I’m proud of you! You did amazing regardless.”

He shot me a lopsided smile, still staring at my lips. “Thanks, babe. That means a lot.”

“Stop sulking. Let’s dance!” Colt urged the four of us into the jumping bodies of the dance floor where we let the beat of the music take us.

Tate’s hands were firm on my hips, Colt’s hand was on the left side of my waist, and Raiden’s hand was on the right. The three of them caged me in, and we danced in sync.

I loved the feel of them against me, and the way they surrounded me made me feel protected.

Tate grabbed my chin and dipped down for another searing kiss, and when he broke away, he was panting. “Thanks for making me feel better, babe!”

“Always!” I grinned, tossing my hands in the air and gliding my hips to the song booming out of the stereos.

Colt tugged me toward him, and he descended on me with a longing kiss, tangling his tongue with mine and groaning as he pulled back. “I felt left out, so I needed a kiss, too.”

I giggled, pecking his lips again before Raiden pulled me toward him and cupped my face. “Do you feel left out, too?”

“Just want everyone looking to know you’re mine, too.” He swooped down and caught my lips with his, and he kissed me with an urge of possessiveness that only Raiden seemed capable of.

I’d been disappointed when Liza had called me to tell me they weren’t able to come because Hal had a family emergency, but even without my best friend, I was having a good time with my boyfriends.

We danced and kissed like that forever until my feet ached, and the guys dragged me off the dance floor and into the kitchen for something to drink.

I tossed back a double shot of strong liquor, and I could feel the gapes of not just my men but everyone else in the kitchen.

The alcohol burned a line down my throat and pooled hot in my belly as I shook my head. “That’s strong!”

“Your girl’s not even chasing it?” Some guy on the team with Tate stared in disbelief.

“It’s smooth enough.” I shrugged, pouring one more shot and taking it.

This time, Raiden opened a soda and handed it to me to chase the burning. I chugged the entire thing before tossing it in the trash.

“I didn’t know you could handle liquor like that!” Tate smirked, crossing his arms as his stare burned into me.

“Don’t you hate the flavor?” Colt shivered in disbelief.

“It’s bad, really bad, but I like the burn!” I laughed.

“You never stop surprising me,” Raiden chuckled. “That’s gotta taste gross, little rose.”

“It’s not good but not gross.”

“Seriously, that’s badass,” another teammate of Tate’s said.

The three of my guys seemed to close in around me as his teammates kept complimenting my drinking skills.

“Are you trying to get the entire MANA ball team in you now?” Caryn’s voice pierced the air.

“What the fuck did you just say to her?” Tate snarled, turning his entire body toward her as Colt and Raiden stayed next to me. “She’s *ours*. Nobody else’s. I’m tired of you insinuating my girlfriend’s slutty because she’s dating more than one of us.”

“She’s fucking all of you, too, I bet!” Caryn’s voice turned from accusatory and spiteful to whiney. “How come it’s okay when she does it, but it’s not when I did?”

“She’s gotta point,” Kevin muttered next to her.

“No, she doesn’t!” Colt shouted, and the chatter in the kitchen died down as everyone started to stare. “Caryn was exclusively dating Tate. *Exclusively*. She still went and had sex with *you*. *One of Tate’s best friends!* Behind his back as a secret for who knows how long!”

Free show to the audience, I guessed. Bitterness swelled in my throat.

“Primrose was up front with all of us from the start that it wasn’t just us. She was interested in all of us, and she did promise exclusivity to us,” Raiden spoke up, his hand resting on my lower back.

“Oh, so it’s okay if she *tells* you she’s a whore, then,” Dana snickered.

“She’s not a fucking whore,” Tate snapped. “Caryn is.”

“You know we would’ve gotten past Kevin,” Caryn pleaded, tears springing to her eyes. “But then she came into the picture, and you forgot all about me.”

“Forgot about you?” Tate ran a hand down his face with a sigh. “That’d be nice. How could I? You won’t leave me alone!”

“Tate’s happy with Primrose,” Colt stated. “Why can’t you just get over it?”

“He’s blinded by her, sure, but we are endgame! We always have been!” Caryn’s voice wobbled.

“I can’t listen to this shit,” I mumbled, vision pulsing at the edges. “Not right now.”

“Let’s go, little rose.” Raiden wrapped his arm around my shoulders and started to walk out of the kitchen before locking eyes with Tate. “Resolve this. Our girl doesn’t need to get bullied every five seconds because of a jealous ex.”

“I agree,” Colt added, moving to stand by Tate. “This has gotten ridiculous. We’re solving this now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Caryn sputtered, eyes widening as she watched me walk with Raiden, away from her.

“Can you take me to Wells?” I mumbled, not wanting to deal with Caryn’s bullshit again.

“Of course.” Raiden tugged me with him out of the house that was located a little off of campus and walked with me into Fire Hall where Wells was holed up in the art studio as usual.

He listened dutifully to me bitch about Caryn’s delusions the entire way there, making sure to add commentary that made me feel good about just leaving and not dealing with her crap again. By the time we’d reached the art room, I’d sobered up completely.

Raiden raised his hand and knocked on the door, classical music wafting from inside. “Wells, it’s us! Open up.”

The sound of the door unlocking came before it swung open to reveal my disheveled artist.

“Hey. You’re here early, aren’t you?” His white t-shirt, splattered with paint, hung off his slender form, and his sweats had just as much paint splatter with some added scorch marks. His raven hair was haphazardly pushed back, and his eyes were tired.

“Caryn started something with her again. Colt and Tate stayed to hopefully make her stop altogether. She wanted to come here. I have a few things I need to do for my father, though,” Raiden explained.

My brows furrowed, and a sense of urgency flooded me as I hugged him. “Do you have to see him?”

“No, little rose,” he answered softly. “Just need to make a few calls about my photography, actually. Whatever you said at the gala has changed his mind about my talents.”

I leaned into Raiden and kissed his lips softly. “You *are* talented. Text me when you reach your dorm?”

“Always.” His gaze met Wells’s. “Don’t let her walk back to her dorm alone.”

“I would never.” Wells waved him off before opening his arms to me. “Come here, beautiful.”

I kissed Raiden once more before I moved forward against Wells’s chest, not caring about the paint as I wrapped my arms around him tightly. “Gods, I missed you.”

We said goodbye to Raiden before Wells shut the door and locked us in the studio.

“Dance with me,” he murmured, tugging me to an open spot in his studio before he started to sway with me in a slow dance. “I’m sure you danced a lot tonight like this with the others.”

The soft glow of the moon filtered through the large open window, and the melody of the classical piece continued to fill the air.

“I did,” I confirmed, holding his hand as he outstretched his arm and spun me around before dipping me.

He was confident, guiding me with effortless grace across the floor, dodging all of the easels and paints scattered everywhere. With every step, his eyes were glued to mine. His hands on me sent streaks of heat down my spine, igniting a desire that spread through every inch of my being.

He brushed his lips against mine, and he pulled me up, nose against nose. “Did you have fun?”

“Until Caryn, but I’m having fun again.” I rested my head against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat merging with the piano’s melody.

“Good. I wanted to make it up to you since I didn’t come.” He spun us across the floor and dipped me low again. “I don’t do well in crowds.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I murmured as he pulled me up and glided us again. “I’m content spending time with you alone or wherever you’re comfortable. This is perfect.”

A ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. “I’m glad.”

In his embrace, time seemed to stand still, and in that moment, I knew I'd fallen in love with him.

For a few minutes, we just danced to the piano ensemble. He spun me and dipped me, peppering me with kisses that made me feel like I was on top of the world.

The music faded to a stop, and so did we.

But I wasn't ready to leave just yet.

"How did you learn to dance like that?" I breathed the question, blood racing through my veins.

"Mom's a famous artist. She's taken me to more than a few large events that call for it. I was never a fan, but I did it for her. Just like I'd do it for you." He slowly untangled himself from me and started walking to the back of the room toward a closet. "I know I told Raiden I'd walk you back to the dorm, but how about I do that in the morning?"

Excitement trickled up my spine as I nodded enthusiastically. "Uh, yeah! That sounds great." I started after him.

He opened the closet door to reveal a small room with one twin bed inside and a dresser. That was it, but even so, it was splattered with all kinds of colors. The comforter was an earthy-toned tie-dye and the dresser had been white but was painted on to depict a sunset full of oranges and blazing reds.

"Woah."

He reached his hand out to me. "Mom paid for me to attend the academy, but I arranged to have this art room exclusively. I forfeited a dorm room for this space."

"It's very *you*," I told him. "And that's a compliment since I love you."

He drew in a sharp breath, stumbling, and his back smacked into the door frame as he gaped at me. "What did you just say?"

Heat washed over my cheeks, but I maintained eye contact with him. "I love you, Wells."

His heart-o-meter jumped to five, surpassing the fourth completely.

He quickly closed the distance between us, mouth descending on mine with devouring kisses that made me see stars. His hands slipped under my jersey, tugging it off in a frenzy of passion. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“I love you,” I mumbled, unable to stop it from tumbling from my lips again.

“I’ve never been in love before.” He pulled his own shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor. “But I imagine...” Then off went his pants until he stood in front of me in his boxers, the head of his erection straining against the fabric. “What I feel for you is love.”

“Yeah?” I rasped, unhooking my bra and letting it fall to the floor before shimmying out of my pants.

“How could I not?” He groaned, dropping to his knees and slipping my panties down until I stepped out of them. He moved his hands up to my thighs and lifted me up to move me to his bed.

I fell against it with a bounce, desire burning through my veins. “What do you mean by that?”

“You haunt everything.” He kicked the door shut to the studio and slid his boxers off, his cock breaking free and bobbing. “You haunt every thought, and every piece of work I create somehow has you.”

The ache between my thighs grew more persistent at the sight of his cock. “Gods, Wells.”

He climbed onto the bed and hovered over me, hands gliding from my knees to my thighs as he settled between them. His eyes were dark with desire, and his tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip. “Say it again.”

“What?” I rasped.

“My name,” he growled, sending licks of electricity through my veins.

As I opened my mouth to say it, he teased the head of his cock up and down my folds, wetting it from my desire.

“Wells,” I said in a strangled sort of moan.

“Yes, just like that, beautiful.” He pushed his heavy erection into my body with a pleasure-filled moan. “I’ve dreamed of this many times.” Pressing harder, deeper, he filled me up completely. “I’ve drawn you, *us*, but even that visual doesn’t compare to the real thing—to you, Primrose.”

“Wells, please,” I whimpered at the searing stretch of my walls. “I need to see them.”

“Oh, I’ll show you.” His breath mingled with mine as his fingers tightened in my hair. “But it won’t compare to what’s happening right now.”

He pulled out almost all the way before plunging deeper, the buzz of heat filled me, building up.

Wanton moans pulled from my throat, and I tangled my fingers through his hair as his mouth met mine in a desperate need to get closer.

He drove into me with both longing and fierceness, not letting up on his brutal pace or kisses.

I teetered on a hazy brink before his cock slammed hard into me, sending a soul-wrenching ecstasy through every muscle. “Wells, oh my gods, Wells!”

Blissful pleasure hummed in every part of me as Wells gave one final thrust before tensing and spilling inside of me.

“I love when you say my name, but I love you even more, Primrose.”

My breath caught at the perfection of this moment, and I wrapped my arms tighter around his neck, pulling him into a tender kiss to convey all of the love and precious feelings I had rushing through me.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

TATE

“I couldn’t care less what your mental issues are, but when you start to obsess over my girlfriend that’s where I draw the line, Caryn,” I forced the words out, anger simmering in my veins as I glared at the woman I’d used to date.

A woman I actually *liked*.

Her black hair tumbled down in curls, and her blue eyes were filled with contempt. I didn’t know when she turned into such a bitch, honestly.

We’d been friends for years before we dated. Back in middle school, she was the lanky, awkward girl with glasses too big for her face. She had been a close friend of mine long before she started caring about brand name accessories and clothes. She’d been kind at one point.

But that girl was long gone.

“Tate!” she gasped, placing a manicured hand to her chest in surprise. “Don’t you see that she’s manipulating you? And it’s not just you she’s manipulating! The class president is being manipulated, too. April told me so!”

“We are not being manipulated.” I gritted my teeth and tried my best to calm my breathing. I didn’t, and wouldn’t, hit girls, but I wanted to knock her teeth in for causing Primrose so much damn trouble all because of me.

“Alderidge is happy, too, by the way.” Colt crossed his arms as he stood next to me. “And according to him, April’s a bitch, too. No wonder you two get along.”

The music from the party quickly faded to background noise, but everyone in the kitchen was staring at us.

“You’re sharing her with other men!” She stomped her foot down in frustration, much like a petulant child. “It’s screwed up that you’re okay with it when you weren’t okay with Kevin and me!”

“For fuck’s sake, Caryn, you and I were exclusive to just each other. Kevin was never part of it.” I raked my fingers through my hair with a groan that sounded more like a growl. “Colt is, Alderidge is, the others *are*.”

“That’s so screwed up, Tate!” Angry tears burned down her cheeks. “Why can’t you see that?”

“Because I love her,” I snapped, and Colt whipped his head toward me.

“I’ve been waiting to hear you admit it.”

A hysterical sob wrenched from Caryn, and she started crying. Her cries sounded a lot like full-blown laughter. If it hadn’t been for the fat tears streaking her mascara down her face, I’d have thought she was laughing.

“I love you, Tate! Why do you think I’m making a fool of myself? I keep throwing myself at you for a reason!” she exploded, swaying on her feet from how much she must’ve drunk, and Dana and Chelsea helped keep her upright. “We are meant to be. I know I fucked up with Kevin, okay? But we should’ve been able to get past it. We would’ve! But then that *slut* opened her legs for you, and—”

Colt moved forward, vibrating with rage as he got in her face. “Shut your fucking mouth about her or I’ll find someone to shut it for you. It’s not about sex at all with her.”

All three girls cowered from his aggressiveness. I’d *never* seen Colt truly angry in all the years I knew him, but he was pissed—and so was I.

“You can’t talk to her like that!” Dana sputtered.

“Too bad, I just did.” He glared at her before glowering at Caryn again. “You’re done messing with Primrose and Tate.”

I'm fucking tired of them both being hurt over your stupid tantrums. Tantrums that left our sweet girlfriend naked in front of others, mind you."

"And if she d-doesn't?" Chelsea stuttered. "Y-You can't tell Caryn what she can and can't do."

Colt's jaw ticked. "Then I'll make sure she doesn't start anything again. I've got connections here that can get all of you expelled."

"Bluffing," Caryn choked the word out, frantically looking at me. "He's bluffing. You wouldn't let him, right?"

"If you come near me or Primrose again, I'll get rid of you myself. What do you think your parents would say if I showed them the video Kevin sent me with you guys screwing in their bed when we were still dating? Timestamp and everything. Not only are you a cheating slut, but you're a disrespectful one."

"He did *what*?" Her eyes widened before panic spread over her face. "You wouldn't."

"Approach me or her again, and I will," I barked out, voice low.

I never raised my voice at anyone, like Colt, at least I tried not to. I lost my cool far more often than Colt did, though.

Caryn knew that, which was why she had a full body reaction to my threat. Tears continued to roll down her face as she wailed, dropping to the floor with her friends on either side of her.

"I'm done with you." I stepped over the bitch with Colt behind me, and we walked out of the house party without talking to anyone else.

People parted as we left, but I could see the entertainment in their eyes as they watched us. Like we were a TV show. People would watch anything with drama, and I knew that someone would've videoed the entire incident, and it would probably start circulating soon.

We walked toward campus, and the evening air was crisp as I sucked in a breath.

“Don’t tell me you feel bad about going off on her?” Colt groaned, shaking his hair out as if he were sweating as much as I was. “She deserved it after what she’s done to Primrose, and what she said about her. Plus, who knows what lies she’s spreading about her that we don’t hear.”

“Fuck no,” I growled out. “I wanted to hurt her after the incident with the showers, and every moment that she’s approached Primrose. She doesn’t deserve Caryn’s wrath, and the only reason she’s getting it is because of me.”

“Did you mean what you said?”

“About what?” I glanced over at my friend who had a sense of longing in his gaze that could’ve only meant he was talking about our girl. “Yes,” I answered without hesitation. “I love her.”

“I do, too,” he murmured as I got a text. “More than I’ve loved anyone, even Cotton.”

“You and your bunnies,” I mused and pulled out my phone, thinking it was Primrose texting me. “That’s good, though.”

Disappointment snaked through me, but I read it since it was Mom.

MOM

Family dinner tomorrow night. See you there!

“Want to come to dinner tomorrow at my parents?” I glanced at him again with a sheepish grin.

“No, thanks.” He shivered in disgust. “Plus, Mom has asked me for help with some assignment prep. It’s a whole thing.”

I sighed. “Maybe Primrose will go with me.”

“Don’t subject her to that,” he protested, jumping onto the sidewalk as a car passed. “I love your parents and all, but they spoil you with everything except the ability to make your own decisions.”

I stepped on the sidewalk and kept up with him. “They’re a little unorthodox, sure.”

“They’ve already planned your life, dude. Primrose isn’t planned, and they’ll have a problem with that.” He frowned.

“Not with her.” I shook my head. “Not when they meet her.”

“Your call,” he mumbled. “But warn Primrose. They loved Caryn, and they were hellbent on you getting married to her. It’s the whole reason you hadn’t told them her cheating was why you broke up.”

“I’ll explain all of that to Primrose, but I know she’ll want to come. She’s met yours, Al’s, and Raiden’s parents.” I texted Mom back.

TATE

Sounds good. I’m bringing a date. You’ll love Primrose. I do.

I stuffed my phone back in my pocket, not expecting a reply since she would probably be freaking out and consulting Dad, anyway. I needed to talk to Primrose, but I would wait until tomorrow so she could spend her time with Wells uninterrupted. Hopefully she wouldn’t mind meeting my family on short notice.

PRIMROSE

“You’re unbelievable,” Leaf scoffed, crossing her arms as she floated in front of me. “First, you don’t come home last night, and now, you’re not even listening to me.”

I bit down on my lip as between my legs throbbed from being filled last night by Wells. “I’m sorry.”

“Get that look off your face! I’m glad you’ve been with Wells, really I am because yay love! But Primrose, focus. I’m your guardian.” She clapped her hands, but it sounded more like a rustle of leaves. “And I’m telling you Caryn is your antagonist, so to speak. She’s going to stir up more drama.”

“Tate said he took care of her when he texted me last night.” I frowned. “Look, I need to meet my two boyfriends with the full five hearts for coffee, you know, because Raiden and Wells are at a whopping five out of five hearts!”

Leaf rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Just remember what I said.”

“Yes, Mom,” I groaned dramatically before high-tailing it to the cafe where Raiden and Wells were waiting on me.

That beautiful scent of coffee filled my nostrils as I walked in and strode around to where they were waiting for me, vanilla latte in hand.

“Are you officially starting to join our coffee mornings?” I smirked at Wells, snagging my latte from Raiden and slipping into the seat by him.

“On mornings I’m not working, yeah.” He flashed me a sultry grin. “After last night, I need the caffeine for once.”

I could feel the blush blooming across my face. “Wells...”

He let out a throaty groan. “There you go, saying my name again.”

“*Wells!*”

Raiden and him both chuckled.

“He already filled me in, little rose.” Raiden kissed my temple. “I get it. Hearing my name from your lips is something out of a fantasy. He’ll be stuck on it for a while.”

I took in a mouthful of hot liquid, scorching my tastebuds right off as I gulped and burned my throat. “Ow.”

“Get her some ice!” they both shouted at each other as I stuck my tongue out and whined.

“Ow.”

“I’ll get the ice,” Wells groaned, getting up and going to the counter.

“The ice will at least soothe your mouth.” Raiden stroked a hand down my hair. “But maybe you can not down a hot latte without letting it cool a bit first.”

“Thank you,” I said with my tongue halfway out of my mouth. “That’s a good idea.”

After Wells got the ice, I melted it on my tongue like they instructed, and it helped—a little. Then, I told them bye and headed to the library to meet with Al for our tutoring session.

As soon as I stepped through the doors, Al texted me.

AL

Sorry, Prim. I’m going to be late. Harold messed a few things up that I have to remedy.

No worries. I'll just wait for you in the library.

I pocketed the phone and excitement washed over me as I noticed a familiar silver-haired professor over by the poetry section.

Being alone wasn't something I did often since the guys and I established our relationship, and I'd learned pretty quickly that I didn't really like being alone. Not when there was a huge gaping space of no memories. It wasn't normal that I didn't have a childhood or any memory before waking up in a magical academy, but it was my life. It was also something I didn't think I'd come to terms with just yet.

Sneaking up behind Cyrus, who was nose-deep in a book, I reached around and covered his eyes. "Guess—"

I didn't get to finish my question because he flailed and stumbled backward, tripping and spinning around with wide eyes as we crashed to the ground with him on top of me—again.

"Rosebud?" Cyrus groaned, lifting off of me and rolling to his ass.

I sat up with a huffed laugh. "Surprise! Although, I think you may have surprised me even more."

"Sorry about that." His cheeks turned red as he leaned in and brushed his lips against mine. "I've missed you."

"I was about to say the same thing," I mumbled against his lips.

He pulled back and got up, offering me a hand. "Liza mentioned you haven't been able to hang out with her much, either."

"I haven't." I took his hand and stood up. "It sucks, but I'm hoping we'll be able to spend some time together soon. Maybe we could all actually go out for lunch soon."

“That would be lovely.” He smiled, leaning down and kissing me again.

“Sorry to interrupt.” Al’s voice sliced through the air as we broke apart slowly. “Harold offered to fix his mistake, and I gave him an ultimatum to do so or be investigated by the dean. He chose to fix it.”

“I’m glad you could make it sooner.” I smiled, moving toward him and kissing his cheek.

It felt so natural being around both of them, and I loved it. There was no hint of jealousy between them, either.

“How are the tutoring sessions going?” Cyrus asked.

“Um...” Al forced a smile on his face. “A joy.”

“That bad?” Cyrus lifted a brow as he shot me a concerned glance. “Fire magic doesn’t suit her very well.”

“Not at all.” Al shook his head in anguish.

“Hey, I do my best!” I protested, crossing my arms over my chest.

“You definitely try.” Al nodded supportively.

“And trying is the first step,” Cyrus added, very non-professor-like.

“Stop ganging up on me.” I pouted.

“Sorry, Prim.” A sheepish smile spread over Al’s lips. “Your work ethic is impressive, though.”

“You are very ambitious.” Cyrus nodded, turning and pushing the book he’d had back on the shelf. “You’ll figure the fire magic out. I mean, you passed Basics. Now, I’d love to stay, but I have a meeting in just a few minutes.”

“That’s okay,” I assured him as he gave me another kiss. “See you later.”

The rest of the tutoring session dissolved into conjuring flames and messing with heat levels. I did pretty great considering I didn’t catch myself on fire, but...

At the last portion of the session, I accidentally conjured a flame too close to his sleeve, but he promptly conjured a splash of water to put it out before it could spread.

“I’m so sorry.” I hid my face in my hands with a groan.

His hands curled around my wrists and pulled my arms down so he could see my face, and he leaned closer. “It’s fine, Prim. I promise.”

“Even if I almost burnt your clothes off?” I sulked.

He chuckled. “I’m too quick with water magic for that.”

“You’re totally going to end up hating me for sucking at magic, huh?” I groaned, tilting my head back.

He let go of my wrists and cupped my face, tugging me close. “You don’t suck at magic. You’re very good at water and air magic. Besides, I like you far too much to hate you.”

His lips descended upon mine in a longing, tender kiss. His tongue slid against mine, and I moaned into his mouth from the sheer want slithering through my veins.

“Not surprised to find you like this again.” Harold’s aggravating, awkward laugh filled the air at his annoying attempt at a joke.

I grabbed the back of Al’s neck and finished our kiss before slowly pulling away. “I like you a lot, Al.”

“Are they like this a lot, then?” April gagged next to him, her pointed nose snubbing us.

“Almost every time I come,” Harold said.

“You truly don’t know what you mean to me, Prim. I wish I had more time to show you.” Al pulled away and glared at his two council members. “What is it now?”

“Looks like you’re just messing around instead of tutoring,” April snarked, smoothing back a few flyaways. “We have other things we could be doing, Alderidge.”

“I’ve actually learned a lot from these sessions,” I muttered, stretching my arms out on the desk.

“I’m sure you don’t need to be taught that stuff since you have more boyfriends than I can count on one hand.” April glanced down at me, disgust in her eyes.

I snorted, lacing my fingers together as I forced a polite smile on my face. “I’m talking about fire magic, idiot.”

She gasped. “I’m not an idiot. I’m next in line to be Vice President when Harold graduates this term.”

“Woah, so cool.” I rolled my eyes.

“You won’t be if you all can’t do your job without me overseeing every little thing you do. The entire point of the Vice President is to be able to handle what I delegate without me having to go and redo the entire thing. I can’t demote you or kick you off the council without prior approval and investigation from the dean. However, if you can’t manage a single task on your own, I will have no choice but to report the both of you. April, you don’t even try to do the tasks Harold delegates to you.”

“But I—”

“Delegating them isn’t doing your job,” Al cut her off. “You’re not in the position to delegate.”

“We’ll do better,” Harold stated, voice wobbling. “I’ve almost graduated, and I know I’ve failed at my duties countless times now, but please don’t do that. I’m almost out of here.”

“But do you deserve the Vice President title?” Al raised a brow. “Not really. If you start picking up the slack now, I’ll refrain. April, there’s no way you’ll get his position.”

“This is the last time,” Harold promised, eyes shining with tears.

“You always say that. Let’s go fix whatever mess you’ve made, but if this happens one more time, I’m reporting both of you.” Al heaved a sigh before he turned to me. He leaned closer and kissed my cheek. “See you later, Prim.”

“See you later.” I turned my head and kissed his lips before he turned and left the library with Harold and April trailing

behind him.

Blowing out a steady breath, I pulled out my phone to find a few messages from Tate.

TATE

BABE!

Don't catch your clothes on fire with Alderidge at tutoring. (Winky face emoji)

I hope you had fun with Wells last night. He filled me in on what happened. (kissy face emoji)

Listen...

I have a major favor.

Please have dinner with me and my parents tonight? Full disclosure: they love me and all, but they think they can dictate my love life...and they still haven't accepted my break up with Caryn.

I told them about you, and they want to meet you. I'd love for you to meet them.

By the way, I don't think Caryn will be messing with you again. (Smiley face emoji.)

...

I shouldn't have texted when you were in a session. I'm freaking out waiting for your response.

Three dots were on the screen, and I pressed my tongue against my cheek as I typed my response. As soon as I started typing, Tate stopped.

PRIMROSE

I'll go with you. No plans tonight. (Smiley face emoji)
But if your parents say anything about you with
Caryn, I may lose my temper. (Angel face emoji)

TATE

YES! If that happens, which it won't, I'll take you and
leave, babe. Pick you up at 6. (Kissy face emoji)

I huffed a laugh and started packing my belongings. Anticipation swept through me. I had plenty of one-on-one time with Tate, but I was excited to finally be able to meet his parents. Hopefully, they weren't as bad as Al's or Raiden's.

PRIMROSE

Do you know those scenes in dating simulations when you meet your love interest's antagonistic force?

The one that stands in the way of true love?

When it came to Tate, I knew Caryn was my antagonistic force, but apparently, so was his mother.

"You're...not what I expected." Tate's mother forced a chuckle as she tucked a piece of her curly brown hair so much like Tate's behind her ear. "Rose, is it?"

"Primrose," I corrected her with a polite smile, holding my hand out for her to shake with her dainty hand. "If it's any consolation, you're not what I expected, either."

I'd expected someone *nice*. Like Tate.

"Oh." She smiled slightly, glancing at her husband as she dropped my hand like it was a hot potato. "That's probably for the best."

"Excuse my wife's lack of enthusiasm, Primrose. Her name's Hayley, and I'm Lance." Tate's dad reached his hand out, shaking mine firmly. His eyes were like his son's, but they lacked the mischievousness in Tate's. "To be frank, we'd already gotten attached to Tate's ex-girlfriend, Caryn."

"Yes," Hayley agreed softly. "Not that you aren't lovely, as you are, but you're the complete opposite of Caryn."

"She's elegant," Lance stated.

“And she matches Tate’s height. You’re extremely short,” Hayley added. “She’s got long, pretty black hair that’s so glossy and straight. Yours is unruly curls of dark blonde, which is great...for you.”

“And Caryn has beautiful blue eyes.” Lance sighed dreamily. “Yours are...green. But they are a pretty and bright shade, I’ll give you that.”

What...the fuck?

I side-eyed Tate, but he looked shell-shocked too.

Hayley smiled at her husband, holding his hand. “Tate and Caryn would make the prettiest babies, and her parents and us are very close. It’s truly nothing against you. We just want to be honest and lay this out in front of both of you.”

I snapped my mouth shut as Tate blinked owlishly at his parents. It was obvious he was completely caught off guard by their words as well.

His parents were totally obsessed with his crazy ex-girlfriend.

“Plus, Caryn only wants Tate. We understand you’re in a relationship with our son *and* others,” Lance said matter-of-factly. “That’s not what we want for him.”

“I—I didn’t tell you that,” Tate stuttered, for the first time in knowing him, and an angry red flushed his face as he stared at his parents. “And for the record, Primrose is stunning. More beautiful than Caryn in not just looks but in heart.”

“Primrose is a beautiful woman, too.” Hayley winced, glancing over her shoulder. “Caryn just compliments you more.”

“Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Mint.” Caryn’s voice glided down the large hallway of mahogany wooden floors and white walls. She confidently strode down it, stopping between Tate’s parents with a victory smirk on her painted red lips. She was such a manipulative little bitch, but I had to give her credit where it was due.

She was stunning. Her black hair shined with each movement, like a freaking raven waterfall, and she wore black smokey eyeshadow that brought out the blue of her eyes. A tight black evening gown hugged her body like she was going to a gala or something.

She *was* a lot more elegant than I was.

I glanced down at my plain attire; a t-shirt and jeans with some sneakers.

I'd never been insecure since I'd woken up at the academy...had I? What was this feeling?

An overwhelming lump of unworthiness lodged in my throat.

I knew I was better for Tate than Caryn. He was mine no matter what anyone said—including his Caryn-obsessed parents.

But why couldn't I shake the feeling of being second best? Why did the way his parents doted on her and compared us make my gut rebel in a deep-seated protest?

Heat pricked at my eyes, but I blinked them away and swiped a finger under each to not ruin the little mascara I did put on.

Tate's eyes fluttered shut as he sucked in a controlled breath. "The disrespect being shown to Primrose and myself right now embodies everything you've taught me *not* to do. Primrose may be dating more than me, but it's an arrangement I've agreed to and am happy with. I am so in love with Primrose I can't even think straight, and you're being nasty to her."

In love with me?

My head whipped toward him, sending my hair fanning out around me.

"In love?" Hayley gasped.

"We don't mean to be rude," Lance stated with a frown. "Maybe we took it a little far with the comparison."

“You think?” Tate snapped at his father.

“Sorry, Tate,” Caryn said softly, fake innocence oozing from her voice. “I just love you so much. I would hate if she came between us.”

“*She* already has,” I interrupted sharply, crossing my arms over my chest. “Actually, no. You did that yourself.” I cut my gaze toward Tate’s parents. “Tate had said nothing but great things about you both, and I was actually excited to meet you.” I huffed a bitter laugh. “But you had to go and side with the crazy ex-girlfriend who cheated on him by fucking his best friend behind his back. You’re siding with a woman who stole my clothes from the showers and made me walk naked back to my dorm room. Real freaking classy, *Mr. and Mrs. Mint.*”

I turned on my heels and walked out of the house without waiting for a reply.

They didn’t deserve any discourse after what they did.

“She’s absolutely right. Until you can see Caryn for what she is, don’t bother contacting me again. If and when you do, expect to apologize to Primrose,” I heard Tate tell them before he was opening his car door for me.

“I’m so sorry that happened, babe,” he said softly, pain embedded into the octaves. “They’ve never pulled something like this before.”

“It was probably all orchestrated by Caryn,” I told him as I got in and he shut the door.

“You’re right,” he said, opening the door and sliding into the driver’s seat. “I’m still so fucking sorry, Primrose.”

We didn’t spare the house another glance as he pulled out of the drive and headed back to the academy.

My heart ached like it’d been battered and bruised by the way they’d compared me to Caryn. I wasn’t sure why it affected me so deeply, but it felt like unresolved trauma lingering in my soul just by how raw I felt.

“You are genuinely a thousand times better than Caryn, babe.” Tate steered the car with one hand and slid the other my

thigh to rest as he drove.

“Tell me more,” I joked weakly, placing my hand on his.

“You’re a much better girlfriend than she was,” he told me. “I mean it, too. Caryn never cared about my wants or feelings. You do. She always made me feel like shit for everything. You don’t. You have the best ass, she doesn’t.”

“My ass?” I raised a brow at him, my chest feeling lighter at his comparison to Caryn in a much better way.

“I’m the ass guy, Colt’s the boob guy.” He flicked his gaze to me for a second before returning to the road. “Colt told me all about your boobs, though. I can’t wait to see them.”

“What makes you think I’ll show them to you?” I challenged.

His grip on my thigh tightened, and heat washed over me. “Because when we get back to the dorm, you’re mine. Colt’s staying at his parent’s tonight to give us the night alone.”

“He did?” The air stalled in my lungs before the excitement filled me. “I love that man.”

“And I love you,” he said lightly, but his knuckles turned white on the steering wheel.

“I love you, too, Tate.”

“Just wait until we get back, and I get my hands on you,” he growled out, increasing our speed.

His heart-o-meter jumped to four hearts.



“YOUR HANDS ARE ON ME,” I BREATHED TEASINGLY AS TATE pinned me against his bed with one hand as the other cupped and played with my breast. Brown curls obscured part of his left eye as he hovered over me.

“Not the only thing on you.” His cock pressed into my core as more of a threat than a promise. He’d undressed us both the moment the door shut.

It was impressive.

“I’ve waited too long for you. Hands and knees. Let me see that pretty ass.”

My breath caught as he flipped me over with little resistance.

I gripped the comforter and arched my back, lowering my face into the bed and inhaling Tate’s sea salt scent.

His tongue swept through my pussy from behind before he moaned. “Colt was right. You *do* taste delicious.”

“Tate!” A ragged breath tore from me as pleasure exploded in bursts with each lick.

“Look at you...” He dealt a fast swat to my ass cheek before the head of his dick swept through my desire. “My girlfriend is *so* needy for me, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” I whimpered, pressing my face deeper into the covers as I lifted my ass higher.

In one firm stroke, he sheathed into me fully.

Moans filled the room from both of us, and my pussy spasmed beautifully around him as it got used to him.

“This is Heaven, Primrose.” He pulled mostly out before slamming balls deep over and over again in slow, controlled strokes.

Each thrust sent me reeling with ecstasy. “Yes, it is!”

“You’re everything.” He tightened his grip on my hips, driving his dick into me harder, faster, building up the pressure begging to be released inside of me. “Don’t ever question what you do to me.”

“I love you, Tate,” I cried out at his brutal pace, and color burst behind my eyelids as my body convulsed from the release of pressure. Pleasure tore through my being, washing over my muscles.

“I love you, babe,” he moaned, his hips stuttering to a stop as he spilled inside of me. “I love you so much that I don’t care what anyone says, you’re it for me.”

“Same here,” I mumbled and slumped against the bed, buzzing with exhaustion.

“Did I break you with my dick?” He pulled out and cleaned me up with some rag, chuckling when I flinched from over-sensitivity.

“Best way to break.” I flipped over as he settled beside me.

“I’ll break you anytime.” He pulled me against him and wrapped his arms around me securely. “Thanks for trying to go to dinner with me. I’m sorry it turned out the way it did. They’ve never done anything like that before.”

I tightened my hold on him, burying my face against his chest. “The comparison to Caryn honestly hurt the most.”

“There is no comparison, babe.” He tilted my head up by my chin and met my lips in a kiss that poured love into my soul. Tate was playful most of the time, but I knew how he felt about me. “You’ll always come out on top. I knew it from the moment I met you that you would be mine.”

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

Another month passed in my new world, and I passed Intermediate midterms with gliding colors. I'd say flying, but well, Fire Intermediate midterms proved to be one hell of a challenge for me.

I couldn't believe I was that much closer to starting Advanced classes.

Ever since that dinner-turned-boning in Tate's dorm, Caryn had left us alone. Tate and I were more than relieved, and his parents were constantly trying to get on his good side again. They even invited me to a new dinner, but we decided not to do that so quickly. Something about the way they degraded me against Caryn hurt more than it should've. Tate knew that, and he told his parents they'd have a lot to make up for.

Colt and I have officially dubbed Friday nights game night, and we'd spent a lot of time gaming and rolling around in bed. Sometimes, Tate or Raiden joined in. With the gaming, not necessarily the rolling around in bed.

I'd brought the idea of a threesome up to all of my men, but the only ones down with one were Colt and Tate, which was fair. Boundaries and all. One day, I'd definitely make sure Colt, Tate, and I had our chance.

Cyrus and I had also designated Wednesday lunches with Liza and her boyfriends. It was a perfect setup because I got to eat with my busy professor boyfriend and see my best friend.

Speaking of Liza, she'd been extra busy since she was in Specialized classes like AI, so we didn't have as much time to

hang out as we liked.

Al made good on his threat and reported Harold to the dean after Harold proved to be useless again. Unfortunately, the dean didn't have time to properly investigate before Harold graduated, but it did come back to show his incompetence. Fortunately, April did not get the Vice President role. Instead, some guy named Ben got it. I liked Ben because he actually did his job. It freed up a little more time for Al to focus on his studies, which we could do together, mostly. He still tutored me on Thursdays, and with Ben working under him, the sessions stayed uninterrupted.

Raiden had escalated to pictures of me while we made love. I'd even found a few photos on his wall of my pleasure-filled expressions with the other guys, but I didn't want to push him by asking. It was hot that he'd had them, especially since I didn't remember him being there any time I'd had sex with my other boyfriends. He also snagged a pretty amazing internship at the company he'd wanted to photograph for, thanks to his father. In no way did Raiden or I forgive him, but it was nice that he finally started helping his son achieve what he wanted instead of throwing the burden of taking over his business onto him.

Wells had been my more elusive boyfriend, but we snuck away on weeknights in the studio, dancing or making love. He'd been working on a new project the past week that had our rendezvous on hold, but he wouldn't tell me what it was.

All in all, I was one lucky woman.

"Water sprout," I said, and a geyser of water sprayed from my palm, soaking Tate completely before it died down a few seconds later.

"Oh." I blinked at his soaking wet form.

A sexy smirk pulled at his lips, and he shook his wet brown curls with a shake of his head. "Usually I'm the one getting *you* wet, babe."

A giggle broke free from my chest, and I doubled over. "Sorry!"

He moved forward and hugged me, getting me wet as he did. “Reminds me of how we met.”

I grinned and glanced up to meet his mischievous blue eyes. “Finally got you back for that.”

“Seems so.” He kissed my lips softly before pulling back.

“Great casting, but maybe point your hand toward the absorbent dummy next time, hmm?” Cyrus’s voice wrapped around me as he walked up beside us.

He’d broken the class into pairs to practice, and I felt eyes on us from Caryn, as usual. I didn’t care if she stared. Better than starting crap.

“Heat.” Cyrus snapped his fingers and effectively dried the both of us. “Be a little more focused, rosebud.”

“Yes, sir.” I winked.

“Why don’t you call me sir?” Tate pouted.

“Because I’m the professor.” Cyrus’s gaze darkened as he walked away to another pair to help.

“She’s fucking the professor, too,” Caryn seethed to Dana, her partner.

“Ignore her,” Tate told me, glaring over at the two.

“Water sprout,” I mumbled, pointing my palm slightly off of the dummy.

The hard stream poured from my hand, making my palm tingle with magic as my MANA level started to trickle. It hit Caryn first before spraying Dana when Caryn stumbled back with a shriek.

“What the hell?” Dana wailed.

The two of them stomped over to me with furious expressions before Cyrus rounded back, an amused smirk pulling at his lips—one he managed to keep hidden.

“Primrose, remember what I said about hitting the dummy,” he repeated. “Heat.”

Caryn and Dana were magically dry now, so they looked less like drowned rats and more like, well, rats.

“Thanks, Professor.” Dana stomped back to her spot before noticing Caryn hadn’t followed her.

“I did hit the dummy,” I muttered bitterly, flashing an innocent smile at Cyrus.

Caryn opened and closed her mouth a few times before scowling and trudging back toward Dana.

Cyrus squeezed my shoulder, leaving a warm tingle behind as he went off to help the other students.

He didn’t have to say anything. I knew he understood why I did what I did.

“Good aim, babe.” Tate winked.



I FELL BACK AGAINST MY BED WITH A BOUNCE. “I DON’T KNOW what my old life was like, but I love this one.”

“As the gods intended,” Leaf said, floating in front of the mirror and conjuring flowers that sprouted on her like a pretty dress. “Have you thought about that life anymore?”

I shook my head. “Should I have?”

“No.” She twirled in a blue tulip dress before frowning and blooming yellow daisies. “Your memories should be gone now, but you clung onto yours more than most. Not sure why, though, your life sucked. Maybe it’s because you thought this was a game at first.”

I frowned. “How bad did it suck?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” she scolded me.

“Wait, I’m not the only one reincarnated like this here?” I blinked my surprise away and sat up on the bed.

“Another stupid question, you selfish thing,” she groaned, twirling and plucking a petal from her new dress. “Of course others have been reincarnated here. I’m a guardian for that purpose.”

“I haven’t told Al, Cyrus, or Wells about my reincarnation,” I murmured, feeling almost guilty about not telling her before. “But I did tell Colt, Raiden, and Tate.”

“*Stupid,*” she grunted, rolling her eyes. “It’s a magical world. Most are open to the idea of reincarnation. I didn’t say you had to keep where you came from a secret from them.”

I sat up straight as shock rolled through me. “I didn’t think I had to keep it a secret, but it’s heavy stuff, okay? It’s hard to find the right time to explain it.”

“Better find that time then,” she sassed as a bloom of roses appeared like a headband on her head.

I slipped out of bed and ran my hands through my hair in a huff. “I’m going to go for a walk.”

“Put a jacket on.” She waved me off as I put my shoes and jacket on and headed out the door.

As I left the dormitory towers, the cold breeze brushed against my skin. The soft crunch of leaves were underfoot as I walked to the edge of the campus where nobody usually went.

I didn’t even go there anymore, but when I first came here, I did. It was the one spot I could be alone with my thoughts of my old life, a life I didn’t even remember anymore.

Letting out a breath, I caught a glimpse of the fading orange leaves of the trees, clinging onto mostly bare branches. The chill in the air carried a crispness that tickled my tongue with each inhale.

Autumn was over, and the cold of winter lingered in the air.

When I made it to the spot behind the towers of the dorms I’d used to stay at, a familiar figure stood facing away from campus.

Al’s orange hair was pulled back into a bun, and it was a stark contrast amongst the wintry environment. He wore a deep maroon coat, drawn snugly around his frame as he braved the cold like me. His honey eyes were fixed on some

distant point, and he didn't even hear me approach from behind him.

Wisps of his breath escaped into the air as he stood almost statue-like, absorbed in his thoughts.

"Al?" I murmured.

He jolted back, slapping a hand over his heart. "Prim! You scared me."

"Deep in thought?" I linked my fingers behind my back and offered him a soft smile.

His eyes looked strained as he rubbed his jawline. "Something like that. My parents called. They gave me an ultimatum."

My smile fell as a tortured expression formed on his face. "What ultimatum?"

HEART EVENT TRIGGERED flashed above his heart heart-o-meter.

"Be disowned by my parents and lose all access to Magic Company and the jobs the company offers after graduation or break up with you and cut all contact," he said in a bitter tone.

"What did you say?" I sucked in a breath and held it.

He furrowed his brows and looked at me like I was an idiot. I'd never seen him look at me quite like that before, not even when I was screwing up fire magic spells. "Do you honestly have to ask me that, Prim?"

I swallowed what felt like razor blades in my throat. "I wouldn't expect you to give up your future for me, Al."

He shook his head in disbelief before closing the distance between us and wrapping me up in his arms, his autumn scent surrounding me. "I've always wanted to teach, you know?"

"Like, teach magic?" I rested my chin against his chest to meet his gaze.

"Yes." He smoothed a hand down the back of my head. "Tutoring has always been fun, and it's something I really

enjoy. I've always wanted to be a magic professor. Specifically something with water."

"What about your research and position within Magic Company?" I frowned. "Didn't you want to do that? You can't give up your plans for me."

"I'm not breaking things off with you, Prim. I love you too much to do that." My heart stalled in my chest before beating dizzyingly fast. "Besides, I never really cared about research. Teaching magic has always been a dream I couldn't reach since my parents forbade it." A smile etched onto his lips as the breeze came through, chilling me to the bone. I was so glad to be wrapped up in Al's arms.

"You're really good at it." I nuzzled into his chest and inhaled. "And I love you, too."

The heart-o-meter jumped to five.

"Are you busy right now?" he mumbled, biting down on his bottom lip.

"I'm not."

"Let's go." He started moving, and I lengthened my strides to keep up with him as his arms pulled me with him.

"Where to?"

"My dorm, Prim. You and I don't get enough time to just be with each other." He smiled wide, the wind picking up as we made our way into the warmth of our tower, and he led us up to his room.

"I used to share a room with Harold, and that sucked, but since he graduated, I've got it to myself for this last term," he said as he unlocked the door and let me in. "They took out everything of his, and it's officially a one student dorm room."

I walked in, shoes stepping on a dark wooden floor as I marveled at the space. It was almost like the dorms were designed based on the personality of the students. They were never cookie cutter, and I respected that.

Al's room held one full bed with a cream-colored fluffy comforter draped on top and matching pillows. His desk was

oak, pushed against the wall with a tan chair pulled up to it. Several texts laid open on it, and a journal and pen were laid on top of another text. His matching oak dresser was against the wall the door was on.

His room was as sophisticated as he was.

After locking the door, he guided me to the side of the bed where we sat down.

He sucked in a ragged breath before turning to me with a look of determination on his face. “Can I explain something to you? I really should’ve told you before, but it’s hard for us to find time to talk.”

“Tell me anything,” I murmured, tucking my hands in my lap and looking at him.

“I owe you an explanation about why my parents freaked when you met them,” he rasped, ducking his head and staring at a spot on the floor. “I have an uncle that I was never supposed to contact because of his relationship status. It’s something like what we have. It was why I was so hesitant to give this a shot at first. I was fed lies about how miserable and depressed my uncle was because he was sharing his wife. But that wasn’t the truth. Uncle Arthur fell in love with a woman who had more than one boyfriend, and they’re all happy with the arrangement. What I didn’t know was that my dad had been a part of it, too.”

“But your mom?” I gasped. Al had told me about his uncle and him connecting for the first time and their common interests, including our relationship dynamic. “What happened?”

“She was Dad’s best friend and offered herself up as someone he didn’t have to share.” Al winced. “I got into contact with Arthur when I wanted to learn more about his relationship dynamics and what you and I could have together if I gave it a chance.”

“Really?” My brows shot up. “So Arthur is who made you change your mind about me?”

“Not change my mind. I’ve always wanted you, Prim. But yes, he did open my eyes.” He nodded. “I couldn’t get you out of my head, and I didn’t want to give up everything we could have before at least hearing his side of the story. My parents demonized him, Prim.”

“I suppose that makes sense as to why you had been more against this.”

“Yeah.” He swallowed roughly. “You deserved this explanation a long time ago.”

“It’s unfortunate how much time being president takes from you. I do wish we had more time together, but it’s okay, Al.” I reached out and squeezed his hand. “For the record, you deserve more than your parents.”

He turned toward me, squeezing my hand back. “I called Arthur to tell him about my new disowned status, and he informed me that he and his family were my new family. His wife, Renee, agreed. And they’ve been wanting to meet you.” He smiled broadly, but I knew his parents’ decision hurt him. How couldn’t it?

“Arthur and Renee seem sweet.” I glanced down at my lap and fidgeted with my fingers. “I’d love to meet them.”

“I’ll schedule something soon with them, then.” Al smiled at me. “Thanks for listening. I needed to talk about it.”

“Always feel free to talk to me, Al. I wanted to talk to you about something, too.” Nervous energy bloomed through me. “I still need to tell Wells, but the rest of the guys know already.”

“Know what?”

I blew out a heavy sigh. “I’m reincarnated.”

“Well...” He let out a chuckle. “That makes a lot of sense. I kinda figured that, actually.”

My lips parted as shock rippled through me. “How could you possibly...”

“Leaf,” Al murmured, reaching out and pressing his index finger up on my chin to close my mouth. “She’s the best

matchmaker, but she's been known to aide the reincarnated souls as well. You know so little about this world that reincarnation made the most sense. I've developed many hypotheses about you. Reincarnation was my first thought."

"Does it bother you?" My heart thumped loudly in my chest, or maybe I was just hyper aware of it. "I was just reincarnated on my first day of the academy. I have zero knowledge about this world other than what I have learned firsthand."

"Why would it?" Al leaned in and covered my lips with his in a tender kiss before pulling back and smiling.

"I can't remember anything from my past life," I admitted, flicking my gaze to his lips. "How can you be so calm about it when I don't remember anything about myself before I woke up at this academy?"

"Because I love you, and you're exactly where you need to be." He leaned in again, hesitant and careful. The softness of his lips against mine made my heart melt, and I reached up to wrap my arms around his neck and swing my leg over his lap to straddle him. His kisses were tender yet with a lingering sense of need clear from the way his hands gripped my hips.

Breaking the kiss, I slid down his body until my knees hit the ground, and I unfastened his pants.

A hum of satisfaction slipped from my lips at the hardness waiting for me. "You're *so* pretty."

He sucked in a harsh breath of air. "*Oh—I—yeah?*"

"Yes," I purred, my hand wrapping around the base. The feel of his velvety skin jolted my senses and made desire pool low. I leaned down to lick the tip, and saltiness coated my tongue.

He made hungry sounds with the back of his throat before a whimper pulled through. "Prim!"

I moved my tongue down his shaft in rasping strokes before I slid him into my mouth, bobbing up and down on his cock.

Al's fingers knotted in my hair like he was desperate to touch me but was struck by the pleasure I was giving him. "My gods, you're beautiful and perfect and—"

I deep-throated him, only with a small gag, and a moan ripped out of him. Popping off him with an audible sucking sound, I stood up and discarded my clothes.

"You...are *amazing*." He swallowed hard. "I'm a broken record, but my gods, Prim. I love you."

"I love you." I helped slip his shirt off as he kicked down his pants and boxers off his legs.

He stood up and lifted me before settling me onto the bed and hovering over me. His mouth met mine tenderly, with an intensity that was dream-like and erotic at the same time.

I loved it—I loved him.

My mind was blurred with my desire for Al and only Al. His tongue slipped into my mouth, tangling with mine. A warm heat spread through my veins with every kiss.

He broke the kiss and slowly parted my legs, wedging himself between them. His teeth grazed my shoulder. Slowly, he pushed himself into the heated core of my body, sending me reeling with need.

Arching my hips, his cock seared into me, burning me like a brand with his passion for me. A throaty moan filled my ear as he bottomed out. "You're worth everything, Prim."

Tears pricked at my eyes as I wrapped my legs around his waist, his girth stretching me deliciously. "I love you," I choked out.

"I love you." He locked his fingers with mine and stared deeply into my eyes. "I don't care if my parents disowned me." He thrust slowly. "I don't care if you were reincarnated from another world entirely."

My muscles gripped him tighter. "You don't?"

"I don't." Deep steady strokes shook me. "Because I have you, Prim. You're all I need." His strokes were still slow, but they were sure and possessive. "I love you, and I'm okay with

everything. I like being yours. I like you having the others. I'm completely at home with you more than I ever was with my parents."

I loved every moment of having him inside of me, friction penetrating every nerve.

A tear trickled down my cheek as my pussy clenched and rippled around him. Heavy emotions of love and belonging swelled in my throat, and I choked back a happy sob as I met his strokes eagerly. "Gods, I never thought I'd cry during sex...but here we are."

"Good tears, Prim." He kissed away my tears with a tenderness I had longed for in both lives. Memories be damned, I knew that I longed for this. "Good tears because you are mine, and I am yours—in every way now."

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

Leaf was the sassiest plant roommate and guardian ever.

She looked at me like I was stupid as she floated in front of my bed where Liza and I were splayed out discussing my love life.

“This was the goal, Primrose. It was always going to happen,” she said smugly.

“You were against me going after all of the guys at once at first, weren’t you?” I raised my brow.

Leaf huffed and rolled her eyes. “That was before I found out how charmed they were of you, but love was always the endgame here, Primrose.”

Giddiness flowed through me at the thought of my men. Leaf was right. I had found love...six separate times that seemed to fill my heart completely in different ways.

I had full heart-o-meters with everyone except Cyrus and Tate. I didn’t completely understand why Tate wasn’t maxed out, but that was okay. I knew we would get there. I just didn’t know what other heart event would or could be triggered. We’d already confessed our love and made love. That seemed to do the trick for the rest of the guys.

“Who haven’t you shared the love with yet?” Liza gushed at my news.

I had finally told them how in love I was with every single one of my men. Leaf was less impressed, but Leaf was...well, Leaf. Liza, however, was as excited as I was.

“I haven’t told Cyrus yet.” I bit down on my lip. “But he hasn’t said anything, either.”

“I can’t believe my brother *hasn’t* told you yet,” she huffed. “I swear he fell for you the moment he, well, physically fell off a ladder for you. He writes about you constantly.”

“He does?” My heart swelled as I played with the hem of my cozy dress.

Cyrus had been my slowest moving relationship, but it didn’t take anything away from how special he was to me. He meant just as much to me as the other five.

“Come on.” Liza rolled off the bed and grabbed my arm, pulling me along with her. “You need to tell him!”

“Befriending the sister was not a strategy I would’ve thought of.” Leaf sighed.

“I’m the best sister and friend, okay, Leaf?” Liza shot her a venomous glare. “I’m not a strategy!”

Leaf huffed a breath. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“Oh, hush.” I grabbed a sweater to pull over my head and shoved my feet into a pair of boots. “Liza’s the best. I *almost* like her more than her brother.”

“Almost?” she gasped before shrugging. “Fair enough. Why don’t we go tell my brother how much you love him?”

“But, Liza,” I protested weakly as she dragged me along, slamming the door on Leaf as she scolded us about something. “What if he’s busy?”

“Cyrus, busy?” She snorted. “The only time my brother is busy is when Hal or I drag him out. You’re more than fine to go to his room.”

“His room?” I squeaked, and we left our tower and went into another, heading toward the professors’ wing.

A wing she got into with ease for being his sister.

She pulled me along with her until we stopped in front of a door, and she knocked obnoxiously a few times before it

swung open to reveal Cyrus.

A very, *very* delicious Cyrus with sweats, no shirt, and a pen tucked behind his ear.

The irritation in his gaze vanished after his gaze swung from his sister to me.

“Primrose?”

“And Liza,” Liza stated proudly. “I’m dropping your girlfriend off. Have fun!” A maniacal giggle tore from her as she tossed her hand in the air and waved to us, retreating back down the hall we’d come from.

“She just did that.” I stared after her until she disappeared through double doors.

“That’s my sister for you.” He sighed before opening the door wider. “Come in.”

“Thanks.” My face heated as I walked in, eyes glued to the toned planes of his chest. “What’re you doing?”

HEART EVENT TRIGGERED appeared above him.

“Writing.” He kicked the door shut and walked over to a three-seat brown velvet sofa and grabbed a notepad to shut closed. “I wasn’t expecting company, but yours is always welcome.”

“I’ve never been here before,” I murmured, glancing around as a steeping tea wafted through the air from his kitchenette that seemed to intertwine with the faint scent of aging paper and ink. “It’s nice.”

His entire decor kept the theme of rich earthy hues, and there was a constant hum from a kettle on the stove.

There was a queen bed against the wall across from the sofa, and next to it was a bathroom with an open door that led to the darkened room with a toilet and what I thought was just a shower.

Soft sunlight filtered through from the one window near the sofa, casting a warm glow upon two bookshelves near the door. One shelf was filled with poetry of many different

authors varying from gothic genres to contemporary, and the other shelf was filled with duplicate books of all of C. Russ's works.

I kicked off my boots and strode over to the shelf with C. Russ, standing on a green worn rug. "C. Russ?"

"Yeah?" He looked over with a curious glance before shooting me a sheepish smile. "I mean, yes."

"You have so many of them." I turned as he came over, running a hand through his silver locks. "Liza mentioned that you wrote. Are you..."

He handed me the notebook, and I opened it to the last page. My fingers traced the lines of a poem with a familiar style scrawled in elegant handwriting. "Cyrus...this is your work?" My voice dipped low with a mix of disbelief and realization.

He nodded, his blue eyes watching my every movement. There was a hint of apprehension on his face, but he didn't say anything. He just watched me as I put things together.

"C. Russ, the poet tucked away from his readers, the one I've admired since coming here is *you*?" All of the poems I'd read from him filtered through my mind, matching up with all of our interactions. The poem he'd written me when he gave us a chance, certain things he'd say to me in that magically poetic tone, everything flashed through my mind as my heartbeat rushed through my brain.

"I didn't mean to hide from you, rosebud." His shoulders sagged, and he stepped closer, cupping my face with one hand. "But I didn't exactly know how to tell you either."

"Your words mean a lot to me," I rasped. "Your newest work just came out, and it entirely encompasses the theme of *no love lost*."

"You were a muse to me for that collection." A smirk grew on his lips as he walked me back into the shelf with his books behind me, caging me in as his other hand grabbed the top shelf, and he leaned in. "Wells and I share you as a girlfriend but also as a muse."

My heart fluttered. “Do you know why Liza marched me down here to speak to you?”

“Tell me.” His breath fanned over my lips, and his spring scent filled my senses.

“I love you.” The words came in a breathless rush and hung in the air between us.

“Isn’t it obvious by my newest published collection, rosebud?” he whispered, brows furrowing. “I love you, too.”

My gaze dropped to his lips before I closed the distance between us in a heated kiss. My arms wrapped around his neck and pulled me tighter against him, and his hands swept under my dress to my hips, hoisting me up and tugging me closer.

My legs wound around his hips as we kissed, and my back hit the bookshelf hard, causing me to gasp. “Cyrus!”

“Sorry, rosebud.” He chuckled, eyes darkening with desire. His hands on my hips seared into the skin as he carefully set me back down.

“I didn’t say you had to stop.” My body burned with heat.

Gods, I wanted him. I was greedy, I knew that. But I wanted him desperately.

“Are you certain?” His voice turned husky.

“Yes.”

He must’ve seen the pure need for him in my eyes because he dropped to his knees in front of me. His thumbs tucked into my cotton panties and tugged them down my legs in one swift motion.

“I’ve always wanted to try this,” he mused, hooking my legs over his shoulders and disappearing between my thighs.

My arms shot up and grasped for stability from a shelf on the bookshelf. “Oh, Cyrus, oh my *gods!*”

Wanton moans were pulled from my throat as his mouth covered my pussy and his tongue plunged inside me. My hips jerked, and his nose brushed against my clit.

Jolts of pleasure shook me, and I clutched the bookshelf like my life depended on it.

I'd never been eaten out against a bookshelf, but it made sense, honestly. I *was* about to make love to my secret poet boyfriend; at least, I hoped I was.

Cyrus's tongue lashed against my pussy, and I couldn't contain my moans and cries as I rode his face.

The entire room became a blur as my orgasm tore through me, and my legs trembled and tightened dramatically around his head.

He said something muffled, and my legs gave way, giving him the chance to pull back from being smothered to death.

"I've never tasted something so sweet." He sucked in a full breath with a smile on his glistening lips.

He helped me plant my feet safely on the floor and yanked my dress up above my head, baring my braless breasts to him completely.

He ducked his head and slowly rolled his tongue over one of my nipples.

My head fell back, smacking into the shelf. "Ow," I moaned.

He pulled back with a chuckle that vibrated through my body. "Sorry."

I burned with a need that was not yet sated, and I grabbed his arm and guided him toward the bed. "You're poetic even with your tongue, Cyrus."

"Most attractive thing anyone's ever said to me."

We got about a foot from the bed when he caught me by my waist and tossed me onto it.

I sank into the mattress with a soft thud, displayed in all my glory in front of him. "No fair." I pouted.

"It's not?" He arched a brow, stripping out of his sweats and boxers in one swoop. "I think it's fair, rosebud."

A second later, he was on top of me balancing with one hand and the other restraining my arms above my head by my wrists. "I've written about you."

"What about me?" I spread my thighs wider, my heartbeat loud and echoing through my veins.

"I've weaved words of poetry about this." He pushed his heavy erection against my soaking pussy and slipped inside with little resistance. "About how enraptured I am," he moaned. "Completely trapped by the walls of your pussy."

"Deeper," I pleaded, the need for friction and fullness pounding through me.

"Like this?" He pushed his hips to meet mine, driving his cock deeper until his balls hit my ass. A shuddered moan fell from his lips as he looked between us. "I fit perfectly in you, rosebud."

"You do," I gasped, pleasure filling me and building. "Please, more."

He rocked his hips against mine slowly, stroke after stroke, sending shoots of pleasure through my body again and again.

"Harder," I cried out, and he obliged.

He pounded into me with a roughness I craved, staring down at me with darkened eyes filled with something more.

His hips stuttered just as I came, ecstasy ripping through me like a white-hot wave.

Then he forced a few more thrusts to help me over the edge before he spilled inside of me with the sexiest moan on his lips.

He collapsed on top of me, his lips on mine, nibbling and licking in a passionate burst of love that made my heart stall.

"I love you, rosebud, so much."

His heart-o-meter filled completely, and it made my heart freaking *soar*.

The rest of the evening was spent tangled in each other's arms, and Cyrus told me about his life. He explained where he

grew up in some country village with Liza and his parents. They had the best childhood up until their parents were killed in a car accident. Cyrus stepped up to raise Liza, and he never looked back. They were the only family they had. He spoke with such raw emotions that I just held him as tight as I could while he got everything off his chest.

Cyrus and I had been through so much, and we finally made it to this point, beautifully so.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

I woke up this morning in the middle of an anxiety attack and explicit memories of my past life.

Specifically, memories of my older sister and mother berating me about Hearts Pursuit and dating simulations in general. The way they spoke down to me reminded me of how Tate's parents had picked me apart.

What I remembered clearly was that Hearts Pursuit was my escape from that world.

The gods had definitely blessed me greatly for reincarnating me in this world. After seeing what I dealt with at home before reincarnation, I realized that maybe not having parents or family wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

"You okay, little rose?" Raiden's voice pulled me back to the present.

"Oh, yeah. I'm okay." I took the latte he handed me as we strode out of the cafe with Colt and Tate. "Just thinking about that dream."

"You mean nightmare," Colt corrected me, sipping his chocolate coffee. "You woke up screaming, pretty girl."

"It scared the shit out of us," Tate added, running a hand through dark maroon hair—courtesy of Colt's newest prank.

Honestly, it looked cute. But Tate could rock anything.

"You wouldn't wake up at first," Raiden mumbled as we came to a stop in front of a magical sculpture in the Academy

Center with an artist sporting a black mask over his face, presenting it.

The mystery man was well known at our academy as well as this part of the world, apparently. The first time I'd seen his work was with Liza. She told me all about the masked artist, Agni Draco. He never revealed his face but always made sure to announce each piece in public the first time.

I'd never been able to see the man himself until now.

There was always something familiar about his work, but what he presented shot like an arrow through my chest.

Fire and wind magic were used to create a smoke imagery of what seemed to be a visual scene in constant motion. It was of faceless figures dancing in a particular fashion, and the movement and familiarity of the characters struck a chord in my heart.

The man's eyes were trained on me, and even though I couldn't see the color, I knew they would be blue. He sported black hair along with his black attire, and then he just turned and walked out of the Academy Center.

"That guy's actually kind of cool," Colt said.

"Very mysterious," Tate agreed with a nod.

"And talented," Raiden added as he watched the smoke figures do the same dance on repeat.

"I need to go." I looked toward the doors outside, but he'd already left.

"What do you mean?" they asked.

"I need to go to the art room for Wells." I moved and kissed the three of them quickly before taking off after the masked man.

He was ahead of me the entire time, but I finally caught up as he opened the door to the art room.

"Stop!" I pleaded, sucking in a heavy breath and bending over to catch my breath.

His mask was firmly on his face, and he stumbled back into the room.

I followed, shutting the door behind me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He tilted his head, but he didn’t answer me.

I marched up to him and grabbed the bottom of the mask. Pulling it up, I revealed the handsome face of *my* artist.

“You knew,” he murmured, eyes wide with astonishment.

HEART EVENT TRIGGERED was above his head, and I nodded.

“Your art, or Agni’s art, was always very familiar to me. No wonder.” A ghost of a smile played on my lips. “Your newest creation isn’t just innovative and whimsical, but it’s of us. When we were dancing in here.”

“Nobody but my mom has ever known my alter ego.” His lips twitched into a smile as he ambled toward the remote and a classical song carried through the air. “Care to dance, beautiful?”

“*The Agni Draco* wants to dance with me?” I teased, loving the way his cheeks bloomed pink as I took his outstretched hand.

He tugged me into his chest and began to sway. “I want to do more than dance with you.”

“Feeling’s always mutual, Wells,” I mused as he spun and twirled us around to the melody. “Where did you come up with that name? It’s so different from yours.”

“Agni means fire, and fire is my preferred magic type.” He flashed me a wicked smirk, flinging me out and rolling me into him and swayed. “Draco is because my Mom’s name is Lainey which means bright shining light. Mom’s a famous painter and where I get my passion from so it felt right to credit her as well. Plus, I love the stars, and Draco is the name of one of the largest constellations, one that resembles a dragon.”

“Woah,” I breathed as he moved me outward and back, dipping me low, his breath fanning over my lips. “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course you can.” He gave me a teasing smile. “You now know my only secret.”

“I’m not from this world,” I admitted softly to the one love interest I hadn’t told yet.

His chuckle slid down my spine as he moved us around the art room gracefully. “I know, beautiful. Tate let that slip one day, and he explained it. Reincarnated into another world is wild, but I’m more than thankful you were reincarnated here.”

My cheeks flushed. “Tate beat me to it.”

“He did,” he mused, dipping me again, face inches from mine. “But that’s okay. It’s not surprising given how little you understand here, but you also have us. You’ll never be out of place with us. You’re my home, beautiful.”

His heart-o-meter flashed as if it were overflowing.

Tears welled in my eyes as I broke out into a teary smile. “I’m home when I’m with all of you. You’re more than my boyfriends, you are all my family.”

“I’ve never been so in love,” he murmured before slamming his lips to mine in a passionate kiss.

We kissed as we danced, and my heart swelled with love at the fact that all of my men officially knew where I came from but didn’t mind.

PRIMROSE

HEART EVENT TRIGGERED flashed above the door to Tate and Colt's bedroom, and a sense of dread filled my veins like sludge.

Tate was my only boyfriend without a maxed out heart-o-meter which meant he was behind the door. We knew that he would be, but why was the heart event flashing so rapidly?

"What's wrong, pretty girl?" Colt squeezed my shoulder, his arm lazily wrapped around me as we stood in front of his door.

"I have a bad feeling all of a sudden." The air seemed to hang heavy with a sort of foreboding silence.

"Let's go lay down then, beautiful," Wells suggested.

"We'll all get in a snuggle pile." Colt smiled, letting go of me and moving toward the door.

I hesitated but nodded as Colt unlocked and opened the door. When it swung wide to reveal Tate's side of the room, my blood ran cold.

Tate was on his back with only a towel on, dripping wet, with Caryn on top of him in nothing but a robe, straddling his hips. Her manicured nails rested on Tate's bare chest.

"What—" Raiden snarled.

"The—" Wells gasped.

"Fuck," Colt finished.

The room spun, and a whirlwind of disbelief and betrayal mingled in my brain. A raw sound clawed its way up my throat, but no words emerged—only the ache of my chest.

Caryn smirked as she glanced back at us.

Numbness consumed me to my very bones, but I trembled violently as anger surged through me.

I forced my gaze to meet Tate's eyes and my stomach churned. His face was screwed up in disgust as he stared at Caryn. When I took a few moments to fully soak in the scene before me, it was obvious that what I had thought was happening wasn't happening.

Caryn looked to have pushed him onto the bed and climbed on top of him at just the right moment with the way his body was haphazardly on the bed. Tate looked like he'd just gotten back from a shower.

"It's not what it looks like," Tate rushed the words out in a desperate plea, his blue eyes watery as he willed me to understand. His hands were at his sides on the bed, clenched in tight fists as he tried not to touch the bitch. "I swear to gods, babe. I would *never* cheat on you."

Caryn smiled victoriously as she glanced back at me. "Yes, it is exactly like it looks. Your boyfriend *did* cheat on you."

"Little rose," Raiden murmured carefully. "We can leave."

"There's no fucking way this is happening." Colt speared them both with a disgusted look.

"I don't think it's as it seems," Wells muttered, staring at the two of them cautiously. "No way Tate would do this."

HEART EVENT still hung above Tate's four hearts, and rage consumed me.

"I agree." I clicked my tongue and stormed over to the bed, making up my mind.

My playful MANA ball player would never cheat on me, especially not with the mean girl of our story.

“Can’t you just accept defeat—” Caryn screeched as I snatched her off of Tate by her hair and flung her to the floor as hard as I possibly could.

“Funny. I wonder the same about *you*.”

The relief that swept through Tate was immediate, and his body deflated. He jolted up off the bed and held the towel securely in place.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he growled to her, the relief quickly turning to anger as his body shook.

“Why would you even invite her into our room?” Colt shouted at Tate, his brows furrowed together.

“I fucking didn’t! She was in here when I came back from the shower and ambushed me! I was so fucking stunned, I didn’t know how to react until you came and got the bitch off me!” Tate’s words were harsh, sharp like a whip. But even so, there was a tremble in his muscles that set my teeth on edge.

That bitch had jumped him.

Colt shut his mouth before piercing her with a glower. “How did you even get in here?”

“I didn’t! He let me in!” She pointed to Tate hysterically, tears streaming down her face now. “Tate, just admit that you still love me!”

“Still love you?” His words were coated in hatred. “I never loved you. Maybe I thought I did a long ass time ago, but once I fell in love with Primrose, I knew I never loved you.”

“But, Tate!” she wailed, her composure crumbling. “How could you just discard me like this?”

“I’m done.” I stomped forward and yanked her by her hair, dragging her behind me toward the door as she flailed, cried, and screamed. “Mean girl bullying is one thing.” I tossed her into the hall, my biceps burning from the momentum. “But sexually assaulting my boyfriend is going too far. If you come near either of us again, I’ll break your fucking nose. K, bye!” I slammed the door shut.

Spinning on my heels, I waltzed over to Tate and fussed over him, running my hands all over his exposed skin. “Are you okay?”

His heart-o-meter gained the last heart, making all six of my boyfriend’s heart-o-meters’ maxed out.

“I’m better now. She came out from behind the door when I shut it. It happened moments before you came in. It was fucking terrible.” He heaved a tired sigh. “I hate that she touched me. Please keep doing that.”

My hands roamed over every part of him, and I slipped under the towel, doing a quick stroke of his dick—just to make sure it was okay, too.

A moan slipped from Tate, and he shot a mischievous look toward the guys. “In front of them? I mean, if you insist, babe.”

I hushed him with a kiss, soft and tender and caring, and then I pulled away. “You’re okay,” I murmured.

A slightly guarded look crossed his face as he nodded. “I’m okay, Primrose. I promise. Thank you for what you did.”

Colt rushed over and tackled Tate before assessing him like I did, minus his dick because that was mine.

Raiden and Wells went over to make sure he was okay, and I stepped toward Colt’s side of the room to make a call.

“Prim?” Al’s voice came through the speaker. “What’s going on?”

“Caryn jumped on Tate after he got back from a shower. She broke into his dorm, and I walked in on it. I physically tossed her out of the room. I know you have pull here, so—”

“I’ll take care of it,” he interrupted in a soothing yet stern voice. “Calm down, sweetheart, I’ve got this. I’ll call you back soon, okay?”

“O—okay,” I said and took a deep breath.

After I got off the phone with Al, I went over to the guys who had formed a snuggle pile on top of a ton of blankets on

the floor. Colt tugged me down and helped me onto Tate's chest.

"I got you, babe." He wrapped his arms around me as I sank into the snuggle fest.

Colt was next to Tate, and Raiden was next to Tate. Wells was on the other side of Raiden, but we all just smooshed close to each other.

"Al said he'd take care of her," I mumbled against his chest, loving the feel of so many of my men being around me.

"What's that mean?" Tate asked.

"It means he's the student council president with a ton of connections in this academy," Wells stated.

"Meaning he'll get her ass expelled, probably." Colt grinned.

"At least we won't have to worry about her anymore." I inhaled their mingled scents and just enjoyed the fact that I trusted the men I loved.

I couldn't wait for the future with all of them.

HEART-O-METER PROGRESS

ALDERIDGE: 

COLT: 

CYRUS: 

RAIDEN: 

TATE: 

WELLS: 

PRIMROSE

Just like that, finals for my intermediate classes were over. Thanks to all of Al's tutoring, I passed Fire Intermediates with a whopping C. Cyrus and Al were just happy I passed, and so was I.

According to my two studious boyfriends, it was time for me to start thinking of specialized magic study. Water and wind were the two elements I both enjoyed and was good at, so Ice was the specialized studies that I had thought about signing up for.

Once I finished up Advanced classes and moved on to Specialized Studies, Al would have already graduated. He was now enrolled in Light Magic classes, earth and water specialties. He decided to pursue his dream of teaching, though, so he would be enrolled in a different program at the academy to become a magics professor. He cut ties with his parents even after they contacted him and went back on their ultimatum, practically begging him to take the research position at Magic Company to oversee that department. I was proud of him for sticking to what he wanted to do regardless of that. A parent's love should've been unconditional, but theirs was incredibly conditional.

Cyrus's plan was to quit the academy after I graduated, and the dean had agreed to let Al take over Water Magic classes when that happened. Cyrus was going to quit the position anyway, though. He'd signed a contract for a year, and when it was up, he was going back to writing. He was a famous poet, after all. Teaching wasn't his calling, poetry was.

Colt had made the decision to follow in his mom's footsteps and study lightning, which was fire and wind magic's specialty. He'd been taking extra classes with fire to learn better control, but Colt was always better with fire than I was.

Raiden and his father would never mend their broken relationship since his dad was, and I didn't think this lightly, an abusive cunt. However, Raiden did secure an internship at the company he wanted to become a photographer at after graduation, and his father has kept his distance. His father might have gotten him the interview, but his talent got him the internship. He'd been studying extra hard since he would be taking Dark Magic classes, being the specialty of fire and earth, to help him with photography at night.

Tate had been over the moon since Al had used his connections to get Caryn expelled on the grounds of breaking and entering, harassment, and sexual assault. Without her around causing issues, both of us were able to breathe better. He was planning to take Ice classes with me as well. MANA ball had been going great, and Kevin had been kicked off the team due to some harassment incident that hadn't involved us.

Wells had become even more famous than before, and I was so freaking proud of my masked artist. All of his art had embodied some form of our love for the past six months, and each project pushed the boundaries of magic and art. He'd earned all of the notoriety that he had achieved. He was going to be studying lightning, and I could not wait to see what he would do with that.

Liza was in Al's class and would be in his Light Magic classes along with Joey. She did, however, move out of the dormitory and into an apartment with Hal and Joey. I couldn't be happier for her.

Leaf had been happy that I'd finally reached maxed hearts with all of my loves, and so was I.

"Are you even paying attention?" Leaf quipped, planting her hands on her hips and floating in front of my face.

“What?” I blinked a few times, trying to focus on what she’d been saying but coming up empty.

“She said you’ve officially reached a true love story,” Raiden whispered from next to me where we were sitting on my bed, shoulder to shoulder.

“And that she’s leaving,” Cyrus added in a hushed tone on my other side, a hot tea cup settled between his palms.

“Because she needs to help another reincarnated soul,” Wells repeated, sticking a spoonful of pudding into his mouth from his spot on the rug next to me.

“Which is why she’s moving her belongings out,” Al explained as he helped Leaf pack some of her magical items she’d stored in her wooden dresser.

“And why we’ll be moving in.” Colt laid on his stomach, a portable console in hand as he played it.

“It’s only fair,” Tate agreed with a grin, glancing up at me next to Colt as he formed MANA balls and destroyed them over and over again.

“Wait, you’re leaving?” I croaked, hot tears filling my eyes. “But you’ve taught me everything about this world. You’ve been my rock here!”

“I’m a plant, not a rock. And to be specific, I was your guardian.” Leaf’s hardened stare softened. “But you have your soulmates to spend the rest of your life with, and they can teach you anything else you need to know. I can assure you the seven of you will be very happy together. Plus, I’ll make sure to come visit throughout the years.”

“But, I’m going to miss you,” I wailed, throwing my arms around her and pulling her into a hug.

To my genuine surprise, she hugged me back. “Everything’s going to be okay. You’re stronger than you think, Primrose.”

“Thank you!” I sniffled and pulled back just as a golden magical energy wrapped around Leaf and all of her belongings.

“What the fuck is that?” Tate asked.

Colt stopped playing his game as he looked on in shock.

“She did say she was a guardian,” Al mumbled, stepping back from her things as the golden light sparkled and glowed.

“I would never want any other guardian than you!” I told her, my chest aching in a way that was also fulfilled.

Leaf was leaving because I’d achieved what I needed to.

“I’m proud of you,” she told me softly. “Of you and them.”

“But I never told you what I decided I wanted to do in this world!” Panic clawed at me, desperate to tell her everything. Leaf had been there for me from the start.

The magic stalked, glowing and beautiful, but unmoving as she waited.

“I decided I wanted to become a video game developer.” I huffed an ironic chuckle that had her rolling her eyes.

“Leave it to you to be reincarnated into a magical world, attend this *elite* academy only to choose a career where magic isn’t needed.” A sarcastic laugh escaped her before it dissolved into a genuine giggle. “You will be a great game developer, Primrose.”

The light warped around her in one bright swaddle of energy before a flash blinded the room. As the light faded, Leaf and any remnants of her were gone. The entire room was large and now solely mine, but most importantly, it was empty.

A sensation of completeness swelled through me as my chest tightened. Excitement to continue on in this new life and world thrummed to life as I glanced around my room to find each of my men with me.

“I love you.” I fell backward on the bed and stretched my muscles out. “Each one of you makes me feel so complete, it’s not even funny.”

“I love you, babe!” Tate hollered from the ground with a splashing sound as his water MANA ball burst.

“I love you, pretty girl,” Colt cooed, followed by a string of curse words for the zombies on his game.

Cyrus gulped his tea before making a content noise and glancing back at me. “I love you, rosebud.”

“I love you, Prim.” Al moved over to sit on the bed next to Raiden.

“I love you, little rose.” Raiden laid back and turned his head to kiss my cheek.

“I love you, beautiful.” Wells’s voice was filled with depth.

My love for the six of them ran deeper than anything, and hearing their confessions of love all together like that had giddiness surging through my veins.

A large maroon ending screen appeared in my vision as everything else faded out.

Congratulations on maxing out all six love interests’ heart-o-meters! Your EXP has filled with each heart, and your MANA is steadily building. You were chosen for this world for many reasons, and you’re thriving just as we expected.

Have fun and enjoy this life, Primrose.

Sincerely,

The gods who reincarnated you and sent Leaf to watch over you

A warm and fuzzy feeling swarmed through me as I stared at the message. Being reincarnated into a different world had been the biggest blessing because I fell in love with *them*.

PRIMROSE

EPILOGUE

5 years later...

“YOU DID IT?” COLT ASKED IN A RUSHED BREATH AS HE tossed his bag onto the chair and hauled me into his arms.

I’d texted him when I got home about the game I’d developed going into beta, and he rushed home from work, feigning sick to get out of the extra lessons he was teaching at the academy, so he could come play it.

“I did it!” I shouted, wrapping my arms securely around his neck as he spun us around in our kitchen.

Colt set me back down on the tile floor and pulled away with a playful, begging expression. “Can I play it? Please, pretty girl?”

I padded over and dug around in my tote bag I had abandoned on the island when I got home. Pulling out the portable gaming system with my newly developed dating simulation, I handed it over to my eager husband. “All yours.”

Colt let out a squeal, pushing his long blond hair back from his face before grabbing the game and planting a big kiss on my lips. “I’ll be on the couch for the foreseeable future!”

He ran over to the living room and dove onto the couch, starting up the game.

I smiled, shaking my head and grabbing everything out of the fridge to make lasagna for dinner.

The seven of us built our dream home a couple of years ago, and I would never tire of the decor. It was a farmhouse style with a lot of white and a room for each of us to do whatever we wanted to do. And then we had an enormous bedroom with a custom-made bed for all of us to sleep in each night.

The door opened down the hall, and Wells came out covered in paint.

His familiar scent tinged with smoke filled my senses as he rounded the island and kissed me softly. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks.” I beamed at him, not bothering to mention I’d been home for about an hour. “Did you finish the project in time?”

He nodded, eyes twinkling with excitement. “You’ll love it at the show tomorrow evening, beautiful.”

“I know I will.” I grabbed the pan and put it on the stove top before tossing in the hamburger. “I love everything you create.”

“What about me, rosebud?” Cyrus pouted, strolling out from the hall. I hadn’t heard his door open. “I just finished writing an entire poetry book dedicated to my muse...*you*.”

“You did?” My heart swelled as he cupped my cheeks and peppered kisses all over my face. “When can I read it?”

“As soon as it goes through edits.”

“She’s my muse, too,” Wells grumbled under his breath, crossing his arms.

“And I love that both of my husbands use me as a muse.” I giggled as Cyrus let go of me. “Best feeling ever.”

“We can use you a few other ways, too,” Cyrus murmured in my ear, and Wells’s gaze darkened.

“I look forward to that,” I purred, but I wouldn’t hold my breath.

The only two that had shared me was Colt and Tate. However, Al and Raiden had gotten close once before Tate

ruined the moment. Cyrus and Wells had been hinting lately, though.

Even if it wasn't likely, the heat of desire pooled in my lower abdomen as I tried to focus on cooking the lasagna.

Cyrus and Wells started to help me in the kitchen just as Raiden ambled in from his room, where he had been locked in for a couple of days editing footage for the docu-series he was working on. He'd been hired on as an intern after we graduated from MANA Sim Academy, and I was so proud of how fast he'd secured his dream job there. He quickly changed his mindset from photographer to videographer, and capturing video footage while manipulating dark magic suited him better.

"Finally finished sending the footage over." He stretched his arms over his head as he made his way toward me and wrapped them around me. He kissed me tenderly. "I love your lasagna, little rose. Can I help?"

"Cyrus and Wells beat you to it." I winked, gesturing toward the two mixing the cheeses together.

Raiden pouted before going over and sitting at the island. "Ah, Colt's playing your game?"

"He's the first beta tester."

"I bet he's stoked," Wells said.

"Totally stoked!" Colt hollered at us. "Pretty girl, you outdid yourself."

"It encompasses a lot about our relationships," I admitted, cheeks heating as I thought about the meet-cutes with all of my men. "You'll notice the similarities."

"I can't wait to play it," Cyrus murmured.

"Wait your turn!" Colt clutched the console tighter and rolled onto his stomach as he played.

"The team is going to the MANA bowl!" Tate shouted as he burst through the front door.

My brows raised as he ran over and bear hugged me. “Great job!”

Tate had taken over the coach position at the academy, and he was really amazing at it. I loved going to the MANA ball games and watching him in his element. He’d gone pro the first year out of academy, but the strain on being away from us got to him and his former coach offered him the position.

Tate crashed his lips to mine and darted down the hall. “I’m gonna go take a shower before dinner!”

“Thank gods, you stink!” Colt teased him as he slammed the door.

“He really does after practice,” Wells muttered, and the rest of the guys agreed.

We finished up dinner, and Tate finished his shower.

Al was the last to walk in from work. He took Cyrus’s old job as a professor when he graduated, and he loved it. Al was meant to teach, and he cared so much about students that it melted my heart.

“Hey, guys!” Al beelined toward me after depositing his belongings near the door. “Have a good day, Prim?”

“I did. The game’s finally with beta testers.” I gestured to Colt, who was still playing.

“He’s been looking forward to that. No wonder he ditched early.” Al’s lips descended on mine, and he moaned. “Your lasagna smells so good.”

“Thanks.” I grinned as we all went to the large island and sat down with our plates full of cheesy pasta goodness.

We were all busy, but we made sure to always eat dinner together as a family. The six of them made me incredibly happy, and our heart-o-meters were officially maxed out and had never wavered.

We’d gotten married two years after graduation, and Liza had been my maid of honor while Leaf came in to be my bridesmaid. Hal and Joey had been the guys’ best men, and we’d grown very close with their group.

Liza had actually gotten married a year before we had to Hal and Joey, and she was pregnant with their second child. They had a girl and were hoping for a boy this time but wanted to wait to find out until birth.

We were the best aunt and uncles, but that was all we wanted to be. Being parents didn't feel right for us, and that was okay.

I never would've expected that I had to die in order to live, but that was exactly what had happened, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Hearts Pursuit came to me in a dream after I read a Manga because of the whole ‘sucked inside a video game’ trope! I love all the things with reverse harem and the character in another world vibe, so adding them together made it even better! Seriously, this book has genuinely be FUN to write.

I owe a HUGE thank you to...

Jacob, my husband. I love you! I know if this world had heart-o-meters ours would be maxed out!

Jenni, my editor. You are amazing and always catch the small stuff and big stuff and in between that! I love and appreciate you always!

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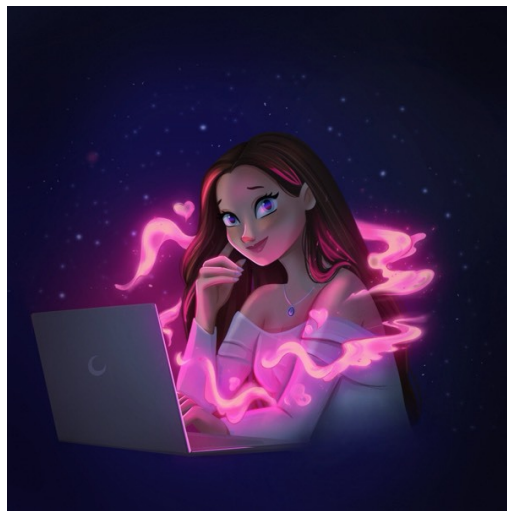
My Beta Readers. You guys are awesome. Seriously! Thank you.

My readers. Without you, creating worlds and characters to fall in love with wouldn’t be possible. You’re so appreciated and loved dearly! I hope Hearts Pursuit sucked you into it and didn’t let go until it made you feel warm and fuzzy!

THANK YOU!

LYRA WINTERS

Hi, I'm Lyra!



Welcome to the realm of complex plots, relatable characters, magical worlds, and 3+ swoon-worthy men that you don't have to choose between!

I'm thrilled you stumbled into my little corner on the web. There's just something about the paranormal side of things

when you add some romance and spice that makes you feel
warm and fuzzy inside!

I'm a twenty-something Kentucky woman who has escaped
fully into the book world. When I'm not typing away on my
laptop, daydreaming book ideas, or devouring stories, I'm
taking care of my three sweet kiddos and loving on my dreamy
husband.

Random facts about me: I love 2000s rap music, cleaning with
true crime documentaries in the background, drinking Coca-
Cola, and relaxing or writing in bubble baths.

Don't be afraid to lose yourself in the escapism of this genre.

XOXO,

your friendly neighborhood paranormal why choose author

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