



KIERNAN

FATED TO THE FAE
BOOK ONE

KATRINA VINCENT

Chapter List

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Stay In Touch](#)

[Please Write a Review!](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

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To my husband:

Your support is the foundation of each day of my life
and this book is as much yours as mine because of it.

I love you, today and always.

Oh, and thank you *so much* for always offering to 'test out'
any spicy scenes to critique for accuracy. You're one of a kind,
handsome.

CHAPTER ONE

FLASH! BRIGHT LIGHTS flickered as the world tilted sideways. Jane felt like she was on a roller coaster, zooming around with no control. She was dizzy and... warm? That didn't make any sense. February in New York City wasn't warm. Ever. She felt her body impact with something hard and unyielding at the same time as someone started yelling. A different someone muttered an oath before laughter rang out.

Jane opened her eyes to see she was surrounded by bare-chested men with muscles on their muscles. All of them were laughing, except for one. That'd be the one she crash-landed on somehow. She figured he must not have found it as funny as everyone else, considering he was on the ground underneath her with a giant scowl on his handsome face.

She quickly scrambled to get off of Grumpy and managed to knee the poor guy in the nuts. *Oops. I guess Grumpy isn't turning that frown upside down anytime soon.* She winced, feeling bad for the accidental move. She shifted so that she could stand up and noticed the green clover-looking grass underneath her.

Okay, Jane. Think. Jane searched her recent memory to figure out how she got here. She was in the city, walking back to her apartment after work. She had planned to pick up some Chinese take-out. She remembered slipping through an alley next to the take-out place as a bit of a shortcut from work. She didn't remember anything past that.

She looked down and saw she was still in work clothes, which as a waitress, consisted of black pants, comfy black shoes, and a shirt with her restaurant's name emblazoned across the back. Her long, curly dark hair was out of its ponytail though, so it would fit under her snow hat with the giant fluffy pom pom on top of it. She was snuggled into the

matching scarf and mittens underneath her winter down coat. She was sweating now.

It was hot.

And she wasn't talking about the half naked men.

She yanked her mittens off her hands and tried to look beyond the men. Giant, spectacular trees and thick plant life. This definitely wasn't New York City. Even Central Park didn't have such brightly colored flowers that looked as though they'd been painted in shades of neon.

"A female?"

"A beautiful female!"

"Well, she's certainly a solid female," Grumpy muttered from beside her, now standing as well in an amazing Irish accent that made her lady parts want to dance.

"Is the lady okay?"

"What is she wearing? She should probably take some more clothes off before she overheats. For her benefit, not mine. Okay, maybe for my benefit, too."

This last question was from a taller guy with a teasing smile that winked mischievously when he caught her looking his way. She felt a hand on her back and turned to see a man with light brown skin and bright blue eyes squatting down beside her.

"Are you alright? Where are you from, miss?"

"I'm from New York," she answered. "Where am I?"

"New York?" The squatting sweetie glanced questioningly at the others. He paused on the shortest guy of the bunch, a man she estimated at 5'10" with the strongest jaw she'd ever seen and longish wavy hair. When the guy with the jaw shook his head in response, he looked back at her. "Are you from the human realm?"

She looked at the sweetie pie as though he was crazy.

"Of course I'm from the human realm. What kind of idiotic question is that? Where are you from? Mars?" She tried

to ignore the gasps and mutters from the group at her response, but couldn't. She started to feel nervous. The guy with the jaw executed a sharp head nod in her direction before a flash of sympathy shot across his face.

“I'm honored to introduce you to Fairie, my lady. That is the name of the Fae Realm, where you are now. I am Roarke and you are most welcome here.”

Jane looked around once more at the lush landscape and vivid colors. She took in the men still surrounding her in a circle. She felt the warmth of the day that couldn't possibly be. She didn't know what to believe. She started breathing faster and faster. She didn't know what to say. This was absurd. Not possible, right? Not possible at all. Maybe these men were messing with her?

Well, she wouldn't be played for a fool. Her mental pep talk came to a screeching halt when Roarke bowed.

When Roarke bent into his bow, something filmy and shiny fluttered above his back.

What the fuck?

Are those... wings?

Jane worried for a moment that she was hallucinating or going to pass out. Either one. But instead, she took a deep breath and told herself she was made of sterner stuff. She could totally handle this. She looked at his dark denim-colored wings and wondered how she hadn't noticed all of the men had them, poking above their shoulders on either side of their head. She wondered if being in denial gave someone selective vision. Was she in denial? Was she in a coma somewhere? How should she handle this?

Could she just accept it temporarily and try to move forward? She figured that as a New Yorker she shouldn't take things at face value. But she also thought that as a New Yorker, she was better than most at handling the odd and taking it in stride.

She decided to accept the crazy for now and handle it until she woke up, the drugs wore off, or she somehow fully bought

into this alternate reality where she found herself. Whatever happened first.

“Fae Realm, huh? So you guys are like fairies or something?”

“That is correct,” Roarke responded.

“And do you have magic powers?”

“Of course we can access our magic!” The taller, funny one burst this out in answer while he looked at her like she had insulted every ancestor in his family tree.

“There’s no magic in the human realm, Finn,” Roarke spat angrily at the funny one.

“WHAT? How do they LIVE?” Finn’s eyes had grown huge and he couldn’t seem to stop shaking his head side to side while staring at Jane as if trying to figure out how she’d made it through life in one piece. He was rubbing his chest, too, as though she’d injured his soul with her horrid insult that she only meant as a simple question.

“I have an awesome life, thank you very much. I’ve never needed magic to live my best life.” Jane sniffed at him, frustrated with all the unknowns and feeling small.

“I’m sorry,” Finn said sheepishly, looking like a scolded child. “Really. I forget what it’s like there. It’s been so long since anyone has been able to get new information either way. Hey. Wait a minute. How...?”

Roarke was nodding solemnly while Grumpy looked like he had eaten something that disagreed with his stomach because his eyes were half shut and his face was screwed up in a grimace. For all Jane knew, that might just be his face, though. The sweet guy looked hopeful with a soft smile and stared at Jane like she was the answer to every prayer he’d ever prayed.

Finn let out a loud whoop and started jumping around with a giant grin, eyes wrinkled in the corners with genuine excitement. Jane’s eyes dropped down to his waist as he started bouncing from place to place. She couldn’t help it, really. The men were all wearing a kind of toga and his

bouncing around was making the toga lift enough to make Jane question if she'd get a peek at whatever he was packing under there.

These guys were all huge. She bet they had giant cocks to match. Shit. It'd be just her luck for it to be the opposite. If the guys all had twigs under their togas, it'd be a tragedy to all females everywhere. Unfortunately, it wasn't Finn that noticed her inappropriate staring, but Grumpy.

Grumpy had his head tilted down with his eyebrows raised way up, his wrinkled nose indicating clear disgust.

“Hoping for a show?”

Jane didn't appreciate him calling her out in front of everyone like that. A girl had needs and it had been a while since Jane's were met by anyone other than herself. She wouldn't shy away from her own actions, though.

“Hell yes, I'm hoping for a show. Finn's a sexy man in his toga.”

Grumpy's mouth dropped open while his eyebrows remained raised, but not a single word came out of his mouth. Jane's mouth twitched into a smug little grin that she had stunned Grumpy speechless. Grumpy's face changed again as he was pushed to the side, Finn filling her vision as he flexed one of his arms to show off his muscles for her.

“Oh, I would like to give you a show, beautiful female,” he purred. “Unfortunately, this isn't a toga. It's just a towel over our swim shorts. You wouldn't have gotten much of a peek. But you and I could both play show and tell if you like. Minus the tell part.”

Grumpy scoffed, Roarke rolled his eyes, and Sweetie Pie gave a soft chuckle at Finn's outrageousness.

“Ignore him, please,” Sweetie Pie said softly, still laughing under his breath. “We do.”

“It's not easy to ignore this much deliciousness in one perfect package,” Finn continued, showcasing his own pecs with his hands.

“Can I ask why you’re here? And you never answered about how you’re doing. I just want to make sure that you aren’t hurt.” Sweetie Pie looked so sincere that her heart melted a bit.

“I’m not hurt,” she answered immediately, “and I’m not sure why I’m here.”

“I do not understand,” Roarke spoke up. “Why did you activate the portal if you were not planning to come through?”

“I didn’t activate any portal.”

“But you must have,” Roarke said. “After the portals closed a few generations ago, any subsequent attempts to open one were unsuccessful. We are not able to open them any longer. And anyway, you came to us. You must have been the one to open it. Did you not open the portal intentionally? What were you attempting to do instead?”

“I wasn’t doing anything. I was just trying to get some take-out for dinner after work. I cut through an alley close to the Chinese restaurant I like and then it was like I woke up here. I didn’t do any woo-woo magic or sacrifice any goats. Besides, I don’t see any portals or vortexes from where I’m standing now. Wouldn’t there be a great big shiny rip in the time-space continuum or something? One we could all see?”

“While I do not understand everything you have just said, you are correct in at least one point. It is worrisome that there is no visible portal. We were all here without you when you showed up in a flash of light. We never saw any portal.”

“If she didn’t set a portal, how did she get here?” Sweetie Pie questioned. “You can’t honestly believe someone else set a portal for her that she happened to walk through and then whoever set it immediately shut it so she couldn’t get back home?”

“I don’t know what to think, Seamus,” Roarke responded to Sweetie Pie. Seamus. It fit his sweet personality and kind eyes.

Jane wanted to think they were all nuts, but seeing the shiny wings on all of their backs and the we’re-not-in-Kansas-

anymore plant life, she couldn't see a better explanation than the one being provided. Unless she was living the full Dorothy treatment. It was definitely possible that she hit her head on the way home leaving her in a coma in a hospital somewhere dreaming all of this up.

“Right now, I don't think it matters how she got here,” Grumpy inserted. “We need to figure out what to do with her. We can't just let her wander around.”

“I'm a grown ass woman, I'll have you know,” Jane snapped. “I can wander around wherever I like, Grumpy. I've been looking out for myself for a long time now.”

Grumpy heaved a sigh, one that seemed to carry the weight of both realms on his shoulders.

“You don't even know what to look out for, female,” he scoffed. “You'd be dead in a day. If that.”

“Wait, dead? Is this a planet full of murderers?”

“Daire, honestly,” Roarke scolded Grumpy. “He is exaggerating. Some of our plant and animal life can be... aggressive. But I do not think you would be dead in a day. And any male would come to your rescue posthaste.”

“Oh, lord, I can feel women's rights just crawling back in time with every word out of your mouth. You're saying a woman couldn't come to my rescue? Only a man?”

At her response, all four men seemed to sag a bit.

“Our realm is less than 10% female,” Sweet Seamus said softly, “with only a third of them within the mating age range. It's highly unlikely that a female would be the one to come to your rescue. Further, if a male saw a female attempting your rescue, they'd immediately step in. It's not a matter of capability, but that our realm cannot risk losing a female when there are so few.”

“Well, fuck.”

“Yes, fuck, indeed,” Roarke responded with a smile at the curse word. Damn those sexy Irish accents were amazing.

“So what do we do with her?” Daire asked.

“I know what I’d like to do with her,” Finn smoothly commented with an exaggerated head nod and a wink in her direction.

“Seriously, Finn?” Daire growled. “Just shut up, you fool.”

Jane giggled. These guys were obviously best friends. She loved the way they interacted and yearned for this kind of companionship in her own life. Jane hadn’t had friends like this in... ever. Jane had never had friends like this.

“We should just ask her,” Seamus said. “But maybe start with her name, fellas, unless she wants us to keep calling her ‘female.’”

“I’m Jane,” she shrugged. “But I’d answer to female, too.” Jane looked around their little clearing. She tried to see if anything was out of place and might indicate a portal to home. Not that she would have any idea what to look for... fucking invisible vortex. “Do you guys know how I get home?”

Jane may as well have kicked Finn’s puppy. His expressive face fell hard and his eyebrows came together as he took the tiniest step in her direction.

“You want to leave? Already?”

“I have a job, Finn. It’s not like I can stay here.”

“A job? What about your family? Or... a male? Are you mated?”

“Um, no, I’m not. Not mated. I don’t really have a family anymore. My mom and sister died in a car accident almost ten years ago and I never knew my father. It’s just me.”

“But you love the work you do, is that it?” Roarke inquired.

“I’m a waitress,” she replied with a shrug. At their blank looks, she continued. “I... deliver food and drinks to people?”

“You’re a barman?” Seamus looked at her with wide eyes and an open mouth, aghast. She may as well have said she ate dog shit for a living, the way he was looking at her.

“Maybe? I don’t know what you’d call it here. Is that bad? I mean, what do your women do here?”

“Well they certainly don’t work,” Daire answered with a sneer. “They shy away from responsibility too much to handle anything like a job. They leave that to the males.”

“With so few females in our realm, we ensure that they have everything they need so that they may focus on relationships and procreation. If you do not like your work and do not have family or a mate at home, why must you leave so quickly?” Roarke asked reasonably. “I do not think it will be an easy task to re-open this portal anyway. We will need to alert my family and see if they are able to send a cohort to attempt re-opening.”

“If I don’t go home, I could lose my job and then I can’t afford my apartment. I’d have nowhere to live.”

“They would throw you out on the streets? Like trash? If you do not have a job?” Roarke looked concerned, as if the mere thought of anyone on the street was abhorrent. “Are there those of your people that truly live on the streets?”

“Yes,” Jane answered honestly. “Are you telling me everyone here has a home?”

“Of course,” Roarke replied. “We would never let any fae be without a home. A place to live and food to eat are minimum standards of care in the Fae Realm.”

“That’s... amazing,” Jane said. She couldn’t imagine how much better life would be without the constant nagging worry that she wouldn’t have enough money that month and she’d lose her home. She couldn’t imagine living a whole week without a gnawing emptiness in her belly from having to choose between food and something else.

“It IS amazing! And you could stay, Jane!” Finn’s puppy dog voice boomed right beside her ear, bringing her back to the conversation and away from her struggles. “You could stay with me if you wanted.”

“You know it doesn’t work like that,” Seamus chided.

“What do you mean?” Jane asked, worried women might be slaves in this realm. Or forced to service multiple men. Wait. Would that be so bad? Her mind briefly spun out with threesome or five-some fantasies with all the delicious men surrounding her. But she knew if she had to pop out baby after baby, that would be too much. “Women don’t have a choice here?”

“Females have every choice here,” Roarke said solemnly.

“Unlike the males,” Daire grumped.

“Honestly, Daire,” Roarke repeated in exasperation before looking back at Jane. “The males have a choice, as well.”

“Okay,” Jane responded a little nervously.

“I think we need to take her to your parents, Roar,” Seamus said reluctantly. “They’ll be able to set up a place for her to safely stay while everything gets figured out.”

“Is your dad, like, the president or something?” Jane asked Roarke.

“Or something,” he answered slowly.

“His father is King Cormac of the Summer Court,” Seamus inserted. “King of Fairie really, with the Winter Court gone.”

“I don’t think we have any other choice,” Finn added with an uncharacteristically stony face.

“You’re sure I can’t just go home?” Jane asked, feeling more nerves than she’d felt since waking up in this dreamland.

“Unless you can see a glowing portal that we can’t, I’d say you’re stuck, female,” Daire grumbled.

“Her name’s Jane,” Finn spoke.

“Don’t care,” Daire replied.

“C’mon, Jane,” Seamus said while gently taking her arm. “It’s not too far.”

“We’re going to walk there?” Jane looked around, but saw forest on all sides. Jane wondered what ‘not too far’ meant. If

it meant twenty miles, she was gonna be pissed.

“Sorry, Princess Jane, it’s my dragon’s day off,” Daire yelled back at her as the group started walking down a slightly hidden path she hadn’t noticed. With all the muscles on display, she figured she could forgive the oversight.

“Wait, there are DRAGONS here?!?” Jane felt a tingle run down her back before her mind prepared to explode. Fae Realm. Shirtless, beautiful fairy men. Lack of females. Jobs optional. Neon flowers and trees taller than she’d ever seen. She could handle everything she’d been hit with so far, but dragons might be the last straw.

“HONESTLY, Daire?” Roarke yelled this time before turning in a huff to Jane and taking a deep breath to calm himself. “There are no dragons here, Jane. And the castle is just behind the next bend. You are on castle grounds already, luckily. You could have ended up deep in the woods with no one for miles and then what would you have done?”

Yeah. What would she have done?

Daire might have been right.

She probably would have wandered around aimlessly, thinking she was hallucinating until she died.

CHAPTER TWO

WALKING WITH THESE men in this magical place, Jane had never felt smaller— or more overdressed— in her life. Jane couldn't stop thinking about the fairies in her story books. Tiny winged things that made flowers bloom and snowflakes fall. That's not what she was seeing here. Jane was the tiny one. No wings on her, but at 5'2" on her best day, the mostly-6-foot-plus men towered over her as they walked. Her eyes took in the differently colored wings on broad backs.

The male fairies in storybooks weren't sexy beasts of men, but were portrayed only slightly more masculine than the average females. They weren't swashbuckling heroes and Let-Me-Call-You-Daddy figures. If anything, her society painted male fairies as beings that liked other males. She wondered if that was the story spread in the human realm because of the very few females in this realm. Jane had always believed every story began with a grain of truth.

Lost in her thoughts, it took Jane a moment to notice they'd cleared the forest. A slight cough next to her drew her attention ahead towards the gleaming castle rising in front of them. It was breathtaking. Every fairy tale castle brought to life. There's no way Walt Disney hadn't been to Fairie. Or at least been told of this exact castle.

And the gardens surrounding the castle were equally impressive. Manicured, but in a way that left nature's beauty to speak for itself with a bit of a wild look.

Once inside, the multicolored stained glass panels caused Jane to pause and stare. She'd never seen anything so beautiful. The entire castle seemed to be made up of gleaming gold and stained glass. She couldn't make out any specific pattern or portrait; geometric shapes made up the entire architectural design.

“I will bring you to the study while I talk with my parents,” Roarke mentioned. “This crew will stay with you while you wait.”

“Course we will,” Finn said as Seamus nodded and Daire scowled.

“Holy shit,” Jane word-vomited. “Parents? How am I just now putting this together! You’re a prince!”

“I suppose you could say that,” Roarke nodded while the other guys chuckled at his expense. “I’m not the eldest brother, though, so the title is not mine to use. You’ll want to greet my parents with their proper titles, though, along with my elder brother should he join us at any point.”

With a last glance at the other guys, Roarke exited the room. Jane took in the ‘study’ that was basically an entire Beauty-and-the-Beast-style library. Jane swooned. She’d always wanted to have a library like this. Figures a castle in a different dimension is where she found it.

“So am I supposed to curtsy or something?” Jane asked the whole group.

“Do you even know how to curtsy, Jane?” Daire challenged.

“Well... no, not really,” Jane responded with a small, sheepish smile.

“I can help you, Jane,” Seamus said, walking towards her. “Watch me.” He let his arms hang straight in front of him, palms up, with the right hand resting in the left. He shifted his weight onto his left foot, tucking his right behind it and touching the toe of his right foot to the ground. Seamus then bent his knees in a slight dip before standing straight again onto both feet. The other two guys guffawed at his pretty little curtsy, but he just shot them the middle finger and sent her his sweet smile. “You try.”

So she did. She bobbled awkwardly a little on her first attempt, but got it right on the next.

“Smile, Jane,” Finn said. “It’s a charming smile, so offer it to our king and queen, right?”

She nodded to Finn, mentally adding ‘smile’ to her curtsy instructions. She was able to practice a few times more before Roarke returned. He looked frustrated, eyebrows slightly pulled together with a small frown.

“Everything okay, Roar?” Finn asked with his own frown.

“Yes, no problems,” Roarke answered, “but they would like to greet you in the throne room.”

“What?” Daire’s head turned sharply towards Roarke at his announcement. “Why?”

“You know how important females are, especially those of mating age,” Roarke sighed before turning to Jane. “Do not be nervous. They are nervous and want to make a good impression on you. With so few females, I am sure they are hoping to convince you to stay in the Fae Realm.”

“But...” Jane started before Roarke interrupted.

“They had already begun moving towards the throne room when I left them. We will want to head that way right now.”

“But,” Jane looked down at her clothes, “look at what I’m wearing! I can’t meet a king and queen in my work clothes!”

“They won’t care what you’re wearing,” Daire grumbled. “All they care about is that you’re female underneath.”

Jane sucked in a concerned breath at his statement. What was going on in this place? Half the time she felt like females were treasured and the other half of the time, she was worried they really were just slaves.

“Aww, don’t you worry, Jane,” Finn cut in, “I don’t think anyone would doubt you’re female underneath your clothes with a body like *that*. Trust me, you’ve got curves in all the right places.”

“Finnegan!” Roarke snapped.

“Sorry, Jane,” Finn apologized with a wolfish smile that showed he wasn’t sorry at all.

Jane had to force herself to focus ahead instead of craning her neck every which way to see more of the castle as they

walked towards the throne room. Jane felt a little nervous when she thought about meeting the king and queen, but it's not like she had clothes to change into, did she? She'd lived her life not being good enough for one thing or the other, and she'd go into this situation just like she went into all of the rest: head held high, chin up, taking no prisoners.

In high school, Jane read the quote by Eleanor Roosevelt where she said "no one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Ever since that day, Jane had made the choice not to give consent for someone to make her feel inferior. She knew her own worth and no one, not even a king or queen, would make her feel less than. Especially in a realm lacking females. Regardless of how they might be treated in this realm, females were a hot commodity based on gender alone, right?

She finished her inner pep talk just as they reached a large set of closed doors. Roarke knocked three gentle taps that seemed to echo behind the doors before stepping back next to Jane. Jane took a deep breath and held it as the doors opened.

Jane's breath escaped her in a rush once the doors cleared her vision and she could see into the massive throne room. *On the bright side*, Jane thought, *at least this room isn't filled with every subject in their kingdom.* The king and queen had a few other people in the room that looked like either guards or well-dressed lords and ladies, but it wasn't full to bursting with people. Fairies. Fae.

"Honored Jane of the Human Realm, you are most welcome here," boomed the king. "It is our hope that your arrival foreshadows a new age of prosperity for our realm."

Say what now?

Great, no pressure on that one.

Jane stood there silently for what must have been a moment too long because Roarke gave her a small nudge on her lower back while also steadying her to prevent a stumble. Jane stepped forward again before dropping into a graceful, if small, curtsy.

“The honor is mine,” Jane responded formally, hoping she said the right thing and wishing someone had helped her come up with something appropriate to say. “It is my hope that my arrival is more than the happy accident it appears. Only time will tell what is to come.”

She felt like she hit the jackpot when the entire room seemed to nod as one.

“You are wise for one so young,” the king responded. “Let us not stand on formality any longer. I invite you to share a meal with my family.”

Jane was going to look at Roarke for guidance when she heard his whisper.

“Accept.”

“You are most gracious,” Jane spoke. “I humbly accept your kind offer.”

The king and queen both nodded before leaving. Their exit signaled the exodus of the rest of the room, because Jane and her four new friends were quickly the only ones left.

“Damn, Princess Jane,” Daire said with his first real smile. Jane’s back itched and she wiggled to placate it. “Didn’t know you had it in you. You sounded like a queen yourself.”

“Truly, you spoke as though you were born royalty,” Roarke admired. “Where did you learn to speak like that?”

“Eh,” Jane replied with a shrug. “My life mostly sucked so I read a lot. Like, *a lot* and whatever I could find. Found a whole box of bodice-rippers once and tried to mimic how they talked.”

“Bodice-rippers?” Roarke asked.

“Umm..” Jane blushed trying to describe this specific genre. “Like sexy books about old-timey Lords and Ladies being intimate.”

“Where can I get a few bodice-rippers? Please tell me you happen to have one in the pocket of your coat.” Finn said eagerly. Jane laughed.

“Sorry, Finn,” she answered. “All I’ve got is a dead cell phone and my wallet. No books, bodice-ripper or otherwise.”

“Seems a shame with such an awfully big coat,” Finn muttered. Jane was still chuckling at Finn when Seamus chimed in.

“Why are you carrying something dead?”

“What?” Jane said, alarmed, before realizing he was asking about her cell phone. “My cell phone? We say it’s dead when it runs out of battery. Out of magic, kind of.”

“Then why do you still carry it if it no longer works?” Seamus looked legitimately concerned that Jane might be missing brain cells.

“It can be re-charged. Um, we can infuse the magic over and over again. But I don’t have what I need to infuse it right now.”

Seamus nodded like this made sense, but it only gave Jane more questions.

“You don’t have technology here? Televisions, phones, radios? Cars?”

“Human technology has never worked here in the Fae Realm. It’s said our magic prevents it from functioning correctly.”

Roarke cut in.

“Are you hungry, Jane?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I had ordered dinner for me to pick up on the way home when I ended up here. I’m not sure how time works here vs. home, but I can tell you I definitely missed my own dinner time.”

“That works well, then,” Roarke mumbled to himself before speaking up. “It would insult the royal family for you not to eat or to pick at your plate. So please do eat. You will want to call my parents Your Majesty unless they invite you to call them something else. Otherwise, try to just be honest. They are your best hope to get home.”

If they wanted her to get home. Jane was mostly worried that might not be the case. If they were so lacking in females, why would they send one away? It seemed infinitely more likely that they would lie to her face and scheme to keep her here. Jane vowed to keep her guard up. As a New Yorker, she was ingrained to do so anyway, right? It shouldn't be too difficult.

“We do have a little time before dinner,” Roarke continued, “and my mother thought you might be more comfortable wearing Fae clothing, so she had a small selection suited to your size sent to one of the guest rooms.”

“Are you serious?” Jane squeaked. Fae clothes! She imagined luxurious brocade dresses a la medieval femininity and sighed. Jane was no fashionista, but she loved pretty things and so rarely had the funds to own anything like that.

“Is that not alright?”

“That's wonderful,” Jane breathed. The quad showed her to a guest room and stepped just inside the door, where a rolling garment rack was also waiting. Jane tried to take in the whole room in one glance, but it was nearly impossible. The room boasted high ceilings and what any human child would call a princess bed with gauzy fabric trailing along the bed's posters. A dresser and vanity with a small array of what she thought to be make up. Thickly piled carpet and gilded walls completed the room.

“Do you.. ah.. do you need any help, Jane?” Roarke questioned.

“I volunteer to stay and help you get dress— OOF.” Daire elbowed Finn in the gut before he could finish the offer, causing Jane to laugh all over again.

“I'll be just fine,” Jane answered with a smile. She shut the door gently as she left and turned with a squeal before falling back onto the plush bed with a dreamy grin. She'd always wanted to trust fall into a cloud bed. She let herself feel the softness for only a moment before gathering her composure and standing to look through the dresses.

They weren't at all what she'd imagined. Instead of thick brocade and lace, she found airy silks and chiffon in vivid gem tones to complement her olive complexion, darker hair and deep brown eyes. She paused on a deep ruby floor-length dress and held it against her in front of the mirror. It was lovely with long, flowing sleeves that ended in a bell-shape and hugged the curves of her small frame. She wondered if it would be too long. Most dresses were. With a small shrug, she undressed and pulled on the new gown.

She didn't know how it was possible, but it was the perfect length. The front of the dress had a high neck for modesty considering the dress was so form-fitting, but the back of the dress was just... gone. There was no back. She didn't know how it would stay up without gaping around the sides, but it felt like the whole dress was glued to her skin firmly. She briefly wondered if the dresses were magic here.

Happy with her choice of dress, she moved to the vanity and looked through what was there. She used some of what she found to freshen up and was even able to put on what she thought was eye liner and lip gloss before there was a knock at the door. She hurried over to open it.

All four guys had changed. They looked amazing in dark slacks and shoes with sort-of vests in different colors covering their chests. A tiny part of her liked the vests, but the bigger part of her, the thirsty girl inside, preferred their bare chests on display. Who wouldn't? As the guys walked into her room, she could see the vests were incredibly unique. They were most like male halter tops that had a vest front and a wide belt around the waist to keep them in place. It left their wings on full display.

Well, shit. That's why her own dress was backless. For wings. But she had no wings. For the first time, she felt a little insecure. It was suicide not to at least act confident in her neighborhood growing up, so she pretty much faked it until she made it. Because of that mentality, Jane had felt comfortable in her own skin regardless of the outer trappings for years. This was a new feeling for her, being worried about how she looked.

“Do I look silly in a backless dress with no wings?” She asked the guys, a little frustrated that she even asked. Seamus looked dumbstruck alongside Roarke. Finnegan was clearly thinking dirty thoughts and hadn’t even heard her speak, as he kept looking her up and down while wiggling his eyebrows at no one. Her reassurance came from the most unlikely of places.

“You clean up well, Jane,” Daire grumbled as though irritated he had to speak at all. “Seeing all of the skin on your back is sexy and kind of scandalous. Your lack of wings isn’t a negative, I swear it.”

Jane blushed so hard she was pretty sure her cheeks turned as dark as her ruby dress. She wasn’t used to compliments. Jane hadn’t had many boyfriends in her life. She’d always had trouble connecting with men, though she never really understood why.

“Thanks, Daire,” she whispered back at him.

She followed the group into what she was sure the royal family considered a small dining room. But to her, the room was a huge space with a monstrously long table and sturdy wooden chairs cushioned in rich green velvet. The table was laden with food and her hunger roared back to life with a vengeance. She was happy that her stomach didn’t yowl loud enough for anyone to hear.

“I will take you to a seat, but do not sit down until the king and queen have both been seated,” Roarke stepped up and whispered in her ear as he guided her to a chair beside the head of the table. The king came in and stood behind the chair at the head of the table, his queen standing behind the chair to his right. The chair beside the queen has a place setting and was empty. The next chair over had Seamus behind it. On her left was Roarke, then Daire, then Finn. There weren’t any place settings at any of the other seats.

The king took his chair, gesturing for everyone else to sit, even with one of the place settings in front of any empty chair. She considered asking Roarke who was missing, but didn’t

know if she was allowed to speak. Thankfully, the king answered her question unasked.

“We only just received word that Kiernan would be a few minutes late for dinner,” he announced. “His meeting in the Winter Court ran long. He explained his delay was unavoidable and sent along his apologies for his rudeness.”

Jane didn't know why the guy thought he was being rude. He couldn't possibly know she was there or that the royal family was entertaining a human guest.

“Was a family dinner already planned for tonight?” Jane queried, wondering if she had interrupted.

“No, no, although Kiernan eats with us more regularly than Roarke, here,” the queen said with an indulgent smile for her younger son.

“We sent word of your arrival before we met in the throne room and he mirrored us to let us know he would be here,” the king explained. “He had to mirror a second time to let us know he would be late.”

“He mirrored you?” Jane asked, confusion coloring her tone.

“We never did explain our magic, did we?” Seamus mused aloud. “Technology of any kind doesn't work here, so instead we use our magic to fulfill our needs. One of the first things we learn to do as fae is use crystals and stones to communicate. Mirrors are just silver and aluminum and are one of the most common tools for communication because of their reflective surface. It allows you to see who you're talking to, if you want, as well as hear.”

“That's incredible,” she breathed.

“That's only a small thing, too,” Finn said with a wink.

“And that's why we wanted to meet with you privately, Jane,” the queen stated. “Roarke explained that we don't have a way to get you home just yet. I can assure you, we will be sending along a cohort who specialize in portals to attempt to locate and reopen your portal. Not just for you, but in hopes that during your time here, you'll grow to love it. Perhaps

enough to assist us in bringing some of your females over that are interested in a new way of life. It would change our world to have an influx of females. Not that we'd prevent males from making the journey.

In the meantime, however, we're concerned about how your presence will impact our peoples' daily lives. You know that females are in the minority here. There's no dating here. To keep everyone safe, our females host a sort of matchmaking game when they're ready to seek a mate. Starting as early as 18 years old all the way up to 50, our populace is eligible to go through comprehensive testing we call The Questioning between each relationship in a female's life to avoid the fighting that could break out amongst the males trying to catch a female's attention."

"I don't understand," Jane said, "your people don't date? And I'm afraid I've already bypassed my 18th birthday. I'm almost 22."

"We said as early as 18. Not every female chooses to begin that early. As for dating, no. Our people do not date in the way that yours do," the king answered. "We used to, but the disparity in the population in regards to gender caused our females to feel unsafe until The Questioning was introduced."

"Doing it this way gives each male a chance without our females having to deal with being constantly bombarded by males trying to introduce themselves and get to know them at all times even while the female is in a committed relationship. Each Questioning signifies the chance for and subsequently the start of a new committed relationship."

"So you.. what?" Jane asked, looking between the king and the queen as they both spoke to her. "You want me to go through The Questioning? Get into a relationship while you look for a way to get me home?"

"Well, yes," the queen said breezily. "We think this will also give you a chance to get to know our customs, our realm, and see if it might be somewhere you want to stay or at least recommend to others from your realm. The Questioning is incredibly successful, Jane. Many of our matches choose to

stay together indefinitely.” She rests her hand on the king’s and gives him an adoring smile. “Like we did. We may not be fated mates, but that’s an incredibly rare phenomenon. We chose to be permanently mate bonded and haven’t had a moment of regret.”

“But this is not necessarily a permanent mate bond for you, Jane,” Roarke interrupts. “This is committed, but casual, and can be ended by either party at any time after 30 days.”

“Although we’d allow you to end the relationship before the 30-day mark should your portal home be located and opened,” the queen said. “We’re not looking to trap you here, but give you an opportunity to know our people.”

“One of our people, at least,” Finn said with Daire’s grumpiness.

“Couldn’t I choose to stay with one of these guys?”

Finn sat up straighter in his seat with a smile and so did Seamus, but both slouched back down a bit when the king started shaking his head.

“I am afraid that making such an allowance would set a precedent that other females might try to follow.”

“You have to understand,” the queen continued, “before The Questioning, our males were having problems with aggression amongst each other, as well as towards the females on occasion. We’ve found this way has eased those tensions. Both genders have opportunities for choice. The only choice they don’t have is to avoid The Questioning altogether while ending up in a committed relationship of any kind.”

“But I’m a human, not a Fae,” she sputtered. “I don’t have wings. I don’t think people will be fighting over *me*.”

“I think you vastly underestimate your worth in a realm of 90% males,” Daire muttered dryly. The queen shot him an irritated look.

“It’s not just about being female,” the queen said, “although that is a part of it, certainly. You’re a beautiful female, Jane, wings or not, and you seem to be a lovely person, too. What’s the worst that can happen? You live with a

man you dislike for a few weeks before going home? You can chalk that up to a new experience, yes?”

Jane started to nod before all of the words hit home in her brain.

“Did you say *live with a man* for a few weeks?”

CHAPTER THREE

JANE TOOK ANOTHER bite of the delicious meal in front of her. If she didn't know better, she'd think she was sitting at an American Thanksgiving dinner, but she doubted that was an actual turkey considering the four legs and lack of wings. She'd just secretly pray it wasn't the fae version of a dog or something. She shuddered at the thought.

The vegetables— wait, fruit— well, she wasn't sure. It was shaped like peas and carrots, but was colored more like fruit. Whatever it actually was, the food was decadent, rich and cooked to perfection. Carefully cutting another bite-sized piece of mystery meat, she placed it gently on her tongue when the door to the dining room opened with a loud thud.

An incredibly tall man, taller even than the other guys she'd met today, walked into the room and towards the king and queen. She could see the strong resemblance between him and the rest of the royal family. This must be the tardy Kiernan. He nodded at his father while he kissed his mother on the cheek before moving towards his own chair.

He stalked to his chair and slid into it gracefully before looking up and opening his mouth to speak. He froze upon seeing Jane and no words came out. Heat erupted in his gaze as he took in every feature on her face. When their eyes met, Jane went to gasp involuntarily. He was gorgeous, but his eyes were like nothing she'd ever seen before. They were completely mesmerizing and looked almost like a kaleidoscope of blue.

Unfortunately, she had just put food in her mouth, which she sucked back into her throat when she gasped, causing her to cough uncontrollably to avoid choking on it.

When she got herself under control enough to look at Kiernan again, any warmth she'd seen in his face was gone. It seemed Kiernan was unimpressed by her coughing fit as he looked to have an impassive air with no expression on his face. She took a sip of water and tried to apologize to the table. Kiernan ignored her as she stumbled through the apology.

“Jane, this is my brother, Prince Kiernan,” Roarke introduced. “Kiernan, this is Jane. Jane, we never asked for your last name. What is it?”

“Winter,” she answered. The elegant queen snorted into her drink at the reply and the king turned his head so sharply towards her that she thought she heard a small crack as his neck popped. Roarke looked at his mother in question, but shrugged when she didn't return his glance before he finished his introductions.

“Jane Winter,” he said.

“Hello, Jane Winter,” Prince Kiernan murmured silkily. He tipped his head in her direction with a small smile. Hearing his voice had Jane squirming a bit in her chair. Everyone in this realm had an Irish accent, but his... wow. His deep voice sounded melodic, almost like he sang her name instead of the brusque speech she was used to hearing in New York. It made her think of that one country singer, Josh Turner, that had the deepest, sexiest voice she'd ever heard. And adding that Irish brogue was enough to get her panties wet no matter where she was or who was around. She wanted to fan her face with one hand, but managed not to embarrass herself even further. Yet.

Roarke reached over and gave Jane's upper arm a gentle stroke of support, making Jane realize she hadn't responded to Kiernan. Instead, she was staring at him dumbly. How much embarrassment could one person take in five minutes?

Kiernan's mouth firmed into a hard line and his eyes lit up with fire, glued to Roarke's small touch on her arm. Did he think she was some kind of gold digger or something, chasing after Roarke? Did she think of Roarke that way? No one could deny he was a good looking man, but he didn't make Jane's panties want to melt off like Kiernan did.

She kept her head down while pushing around the remaining food on her plate. She wasn't sure she wanted to take another bite. Probably best not to risk it. She looked at Kiernan from beneath her eyelashes as covertly as possible, feeling a pulsing warmth in her chest when he managed to catch her eye anyway.

He was handsome, the most handsome man she'd ever seen, if she were being honest. He had a stern face, though, like he never smiled. He wasn't like Daire who seemed to grouse for the fun of it. Kiernan seemed genuinely closed off and almost unhappy. He had longish blond hair, which might bring to mind an elven Lord of the Rings character, but this guy was broad all around and beefy. He had a thick jaw with just a bit of stubble and bright blue eyes underneath thickly feminine lashes. He's the kind of handsome that makes a woman need to check for drool.

And his wings. She loosed a dreamy sigh. Who would have thought wings on a man would be a turn on? But they were, especially his. His wings looked like smoke. Sharply angled edges that showed above his shoulders with the opaque charcoal grey that was mesmerizing.

She wondered what her wings would be like if she had them. She was surprised when an image immediately came to mind of gracefully rounded, luminescent silver wings. Well, her imagination had good taste, she would love to have soft silver wings.

“...The Questioning, Jane?”

When Jane heard her name, she knew she'd been caught not paying attention. When Kiernan's lips turned up in a smirk smug enough to make her want to slap it off his face, she realized he knew she'd been studying him and that it had distracted her enough to tune out the queen. Fuck all the ducks.

“I'm so sorry, Your Majesty,” Jane tried, “I was focusing on calming myself after the coughing and missed your question. Would you kindly repeat it?”

“Please, when we’re with friends, call me Melody,” the queen offered warmly. “Us females tend to be close friends and I hope to include you in that. In public, of course, you’ll need to be more formal. Queen Melody will suffice at that time.”

“Thank you, Your— Melody.”

“Yes, well, I was asking if you are comfortable going through The Questioning? I assure you, all of your newest friends here are eligible to be part of it with you.”

Seamus and Finn shot back up, all smiles again. Roarke was nodding. Daire sat there, still as a statue, so she didn’t know what he was thinking. Should she do this?

“I don’t really understand how it all works,” she said slowly. “And I’d like to be explained the... rules? I don’t know what to call it but I’d like more details of the entire process. And I’d want it announced in front of everyone that if my portal were located, you’d make every effort to re-open it and I could end any relationship with no consequences and go home if I wanted to at that time.”

She saw the king and queen give each other a quick glance and noticed Kieran sitting up straight, nodding as if in approval while looking at her with a question on his face that she couldn’t comprehend.

“I believe this is an acceptable compromise,” the king agreed. “Looks like we’ve all finished with dinner now. Shall we retire to the study for after-dinner drinks?” There were nods all around the table. “We can discuss The Questioning in more detail there.”

Roarke was the first to stand. He turned immediately and held out his hand to help her up. Roarke was such a gentleman. She wondered if he’d had manners hammered into him from a young age. She wondered if Kiernan was the same, and if so, why he seemed almost rude tonight. As everyone began to move towards the study, Jane took those few moments to consider each of the men as a potential love interest.

They were all handsome and so stacked with muscles. She enjoyed the juxtaposition of these burly men with their delicate wings in different hues. Some darker haired or darker skinned, but all of them could model in the human realm in a hot second. Light-hearted Finn was so joyful and fun to be around, but could she see herself living with that amount of energy day in and day out? She wasn't sure. Roarke was respectful and kind, but a little stiff and formal. That would get old quickly, wouldn't it?

What about Sweet Seamus whose kindness and consideration showed with every move he made? Would she crush his kindness with her more brash attitude? Daire could be an interesting choice. He was definitely more her speed, in his personality and his rugged bad-boy looks. She looked at Daire. Took in his dark, shaggy hair and light eyes. Thought about his surliness and how he'd made her feel confident in her clothes earlier while everyone else stood there silently. Was he too grumpy, though? After her hard life, didn't she deserve some easier happiness?

And then there was Kiernan. He was... ridiculously handsome. If she took the time to create her dream man, he would definitely look just like Kiernan. Physically, he was everything she ever wanted, but he barely spoke to her. He didn't seem to like her at all and made no real attempt to talk with her over dinner. She was probably reading too much into his broody attitude and intense reactions.

Could she just put her trust in this little dating game and see where it took her? She didn't fully understand the rules yet, sure, but it sounded like her worst-case scenario was getting a male roommate for a while. Best-case? She found someone to mate with forever and moved her entire life here to the Fae Realm.

Yeah, that didn't sound fucking crazy at all.

Then again, if anyone could actually just leave it all behind, it'd be her. No family, no close friends because she worked all the time. She'd been trying to save up enough to go to college and maybe make a better path for herself, but life kept getting in the way. It certainly wouldn't pain her to leave

behind a few pots and pans, a single mattress on the floor, and some metal folding chairs the bar let her have. She didn't have much more than that. Personal items, clothes... all secondhand and easily forgotten. It was kind of sad, when she laid it all out like that in her mind.

The group settled into the study and the king himself offered drinks. She didn't know what he was offering as nothing he suggested was familiar to her. She wasn't sure what to accept. Kiernan poured something from a tall crystal decanter before bringing it to her.

Their eyes met when their fingers touched and Jane felt warmth emanate from that small brush of fingers.

"It's called Súilíneach," he murmured close to her ear, making her shiver at his nearness. She tracked his movements as he walked to the other side of the room. She tried the drink he'd brought and it reminded her of champagne, but it was sweeter than any she'd had before. When everyone had drinks that wanted them, the king spoke up again.

"Kiernan, how about you go over the rules with Jane," he suggested. "You have been the royal representative for the games since you stopped participating in order to begin taking on royal duties a few years ago."

Jane's heart fell a little. She didn't understand why, though. He was ridiculously attractive, but was also probably the worst choice of the five guys she'd met here and could consider as a soulmate. But still, her heart hurt. She looked over to Kiernan and found him studying her. She couldn't name the emotion on his face. He was so difficult to read.

His head was gently tilted, his shoulder-length blond hair hanging like a curtain she wanted to touch. His lips were slightly pursed and his eyes looked intense. Deep. Like he was contemplating the meaning of the universe.

"I won't be abstaining this Questioning, Father," he finally said. Everyone in the room turned to look at him. "I'll participate for Jane's hand."

“My hand? You make it sound like marriage!” Jane said, her voice raising to almost a squeak. She focused on her breathing and after a moment, cut her eyes towards the queen and continued speaking in an even tone. “You said it wasn’t marriage. Wasn’t permanent.”

“Who knows, beauty,” Kiernan teased with a devilish grin, “perhaps fate was just waiting for a chance to thrust us together into a permanent mate bond. I’m willing to find out if you are.”

Jane looked back to the queen. Her heart was beating too fast. Kiernan was going to participate? Did this mean he wanted to date her? Did all of these guys want to be with her? Did they even care who they were dating? With the female population so low, maybe they just grabbed at any chance for a chick to stick it in? Come to think of it, why was the female population so low?

“Why is your population only 10% female?” Jane asked the room.

The king and queen once again looked to each other. This time, the king answered.

“A few generations ago, the Fae Realm had many portals to different places in the human realm and Fae moved freely between the two. Certain humans with whom we shared deep friendships could be let in on our secret and move freely throughout, as well. Women in the human realm had fought and been granted the right to vote. Our females rightly felt they deserved the same. Unfortunately, the males in power at the time disagreed. After arguing for many years, females grew tired of fighting for the rights humans began taking for granted. Our females decided to live in the human realm until males granted them equal rights, swearing to only return when Fairie was ready for true progress.

The inequality perpetrated by those in power turned even more dire when a few radical males angrily removed the option for the females’ return by destroying *every known portal* to the human realm. A truly rash action, as it left our female population drastically reduced. Suddenly, males were

fighting males over any and every female they could find. Many younger females were kidnapped in an attempt to trigger a bond even though no one has ever purposefully created a fate bond. Fate bonds are a gift from the Gods and cannot be forced. Only a permanent mate bond can be deliberately put into place and it saddens me to admit some females felt they had no other choice but to bond permanently to avoid worse fates. It was a horrific time for us. That is how The Questioning began. Our leaders had no choice but to acknowledge their wrongs as things grew further out of control. This was no longer a blessed society. They offered a public apology and proclaimed on every mirror that women were to be treated as equals. They begged the remaining women to come forward.

Concerned it might be a trap, only a few of the eldest females cautiously came out of hiding. Some time later, the females of mating age came out of hiding as well, stating they wanted the chance to find love, but only on their own terms. They banded together with the then-king, my grandfather, and created this testing as a safeguard to give all genders both opportunities and a choice. Pregnant females still have an equal chance of birthing either gender, but with the initial population so greatly reduced, it's been difficult. The Questioning has kept peace since its inception, but the drawback to its success in matching is that Questionings are rare. More females would change our world. It's not about population control, Jane, but about the hope of love for our people."

Jane was stunned. Truly, you could have pushed her over with a feather. Sounds like the boy fairies here used to be great big jerks and when the girls had enough, they just peaced out. A few idiots made an even more idiotic choice, and screwed almost the whole realm out of love. Wow.

"Okay. I'll need some time to digest all of that. It's... a lot. I'll put it on a shelf for later. Please, tell me about how The Questioning actually works. And when are you looking to get me all paired up?"

"I'll tell you about it, then," the queen cut in with a side eye at Kiernan. "And I'll start by answering the simple

question. We'll begin preparations tomorrow. You'll stay in the castle as our guest for a few nights. It's our hope that you'll have your Questioning completed by then as The Questioning itself rarely takes more than a day or two."

"So s-soon?" Jane stuttered, unnerved.

"The king and I agree it's the best way to introduce you to life here as long as you're amenable. We won't force you into it, Jane."

"They're just happy to guilt you into it," Kiernan added. "If you think about it as simply finding a roommate you might grow to care for, it may sound more reasonable to you."

Jane nodded and took a gulp of the fairy champagne Kiernan had given her. It was fruity and sparkling and everything yummy in a glass. She was afraid to chug it down too fast, though. The last thing she needed was to get drunk in front of royalty and make any bigger of an ass of herself than she already had.

"As for details about the Questioning, it may be best described as a game of elimination. You'll answer some questions for us about basic things and we'll circulate that information to anyone that fits the profile you've created. They'll be able to read any details you share about yourself, as well as see an image of you. If they choose to join your Questioning, they'll be given a 10-question test designed by you. If they pass, they'll be told when to arrive in the castle ballroom.

From there, we have rounds of eliminations. Questions you ask and answer. Tests and games. It's adjusted to fit each female hosting the Questioning. Perhaps you have a fondness for a fruity breakfast pastry and your morning meal is incredibly important to you. You could ask the men to make or bring you breakfast for one of the rounds and eliminate any that don't appeal to you. In a round like that, though, you will eliminate truly based on the food. It's a blind taste test. All elimination rounds are blind for the female. Your only chance of influencing the physical characteristics of your male are with your profile in the beginning. There are all kinds of

games and rounds until you're down to a single male. That's your choice and who you go home with as soon as he is selected."

"So I could eliminate my soulmate if he can't make decent pancakes?"

The queen chuckled.

"I think the idea is that some females place a high value on males that have taken the time to learn to cook. Further using your example, the kind of females I just mentioned may eliminate any male with burnt, inedible food because it signifies *to her* that he did not take the time to learn how to provide for his female and possible family."

Jane thought over what the queen said. It actually sounded kind of fun. Exciting. A bunch of guys that might be interested in her would show up and go through some tests and games until she narrowed it down to just one. Kind of like Tinder on crack. She could get behind this. Ever since her mother and sister died, she'd been alone. This was a real chance to connect with someone. For once in her life, instead of doing the responsible thing, she could let herself try this.

Try for friendship.

Maybe even hope for love?

She noticed all five of the guys staring at her, waiting for a response. It started to make her nervous, so she excused herself to use the restroom.

Roarke found her on her way back to the study in the hallway.

"I wanted to let you know that I think you are an enchanting female," he started, immediately making her feel a little uncomfortable.

"Thank you, Roarke," she spoke over him, hoping to cut him off. She started to walk more quickly to the study.

"Wait, Jane," he called out, speeding up to keep up with her and spitting out the next words when she didn't slow

down. “I need to tell you that I will not participate in your Questioning.”

This caught her attention. Jane stopped and turned back to Roarke.

“Please, correct me if I am wrong, Jane,” he said with a sad smile, “but I do not think you are interested in me in that way. And I am not sure I am actually interested in you. In my heart, I feel we are meant to be friends.”

Jane let out a long breath she didn’t even notice she’d been holding.

“You’re not wrong, Roarke,” she said on an exhale with a smile. “You’re super handsome, but I haven’t felt a spark beyond friendship either. Do you think the other guys...?” She gave him the opportunity to tell her if he thought his friends would participate.

“Oh, they will all participate,” he responded. “You are a beautiful female, like I said, and there aren’t many opportunities for a Questioning, especially with a female of your caliber. I just think I would be doing both of us a disservice by participating when I do not think there is a chance of a mate bond between us.”

“That’s so... you, Roarke,” she replied genuinely. “A gentleman, through and through.”

His cheeks turned a very light pink at her praise. She wanted to give him a hug, he was so adorable.

“There is another reason I will not participate and wanted to let you know now. You do not know many people here and you are allowed a friend to help you through The Questioning. To discuss thoughts and feelings throughout the rounds. I know my mother will offer herself, but I would like to be that friend if you would have me as such.”

Warmth burst into her chest at his words. A true friend. Not just an acquaintance from high school or a drunk guy from the bar trying to get into her pants. She didn’t hesitate this time and threw her arms around Roarke’s neck in a hug.

“Oh, Roarke,” she gushed, “that would be amazing. Better than amazing. It feels exactly right.”

“Oi, Little Brother,” came Kiernan’s growl from the study doorway. She could see the angry flash of his eyes from where she was standing. “You know the fucking rules. No intimate touching allowed unless specified within the rounds of The Questioning until the very end. Get your hands off of her. Now.”

“It’s not what—” Roarke tried to speak, but his brother cut him off, stalking towards the hugging pair.

“Hands. Off. Now.”

Jane’s eyes widened in surprise at his aggression. Is this why the fae instituted The Questioning? Perhaps fae males are more prone to aggressive actions, because she would have sworn a few minutes ago that Kiernan didn’t like her. An hour again earlier and she hadn’t even met him yet. His reaction seemed unreasonable.

Was he just that much of a stickler for the rules? He was going to be king. Rules were important and he was used to enforcing them. But maybe he didn’t like seeing another man so close to her with his hands around her waist in a close hug. Either way his reaction did seem excessive. So why did her lady bits rejoice at the idea that he might want to be the only one touching her?

Roarke gave Jane a gentle push back and she released him from the hold of her arms. Kiernan reached down and took her hand. She felt the warmth of his hand engulf hers, but simultaneously felt like ghost hands had punched her between her shoulder blades. What the? She stumbled a step and would have fallen if not for Kiernan’s hand on hers. So Kiernan can hold her hand but she wasn’t allowed to hug her friend?

She looked up towards Kiernan’s eyes to thank him for the assist, but he was looking down at her hand, where they were connected. When his eyes lifted to hers, they were wide and his mouth was slightly parted. She reached her free hand up towards him, but in same second where he noticed her hand moving towards him, his face shuttered closed. He dropped

her hand like the earth hadn't just moved for them and walked casually away from her back towards the study.

"I will talk to him," Roarke muttered. "Walk slowly, alright?"

She took his advice and meandered the final steps to the study, catching Roarke still talking to Kiernan when she arrived. Kiernan looked completely relaxed, a totally opposite look from the one he had mere moments before. She wasn't a fan of this hot and cold thing with him. What was his deal?

The king and queen were standing when she re-entered the study and looking at her with sincere smiles.

"We'd like to head off to sleep if you've made a decision," the queen shared. "But you can tell us if you need more time to decide."

"I don't need more time," Jane said. She wanted to try this. If she sat around and thought about it for too long, she'd never have the guts to put herself out there. With Roarke offering to act as her support, she felt ready to just do the damn thing. "Let's do it. I'll be your next 'Bachelorette.'"

The queen beamed a bright smile.

"What's a bachelorette?" Finn muttered.

"Who cares? She's gonna do it, so shut up," Daire responded just loud enough for her to hear.

"That's wonderful, Jane. I hope you'll enjoy the process and find true happiness. We'll take our leave now," the queen said.

"We are not as young as we used to be," the king chuckled, sharing an old man's favorite joke that made everyone falsely chuckle while simultaneously rolling their eyes on the inside.

Guess some things are universal.

"We'll handle creating your profile together in the morning, dear, over breakfast at eight," the queen finished. Jane nodded her agreement and went to refill her own wine glass. She felt fine. A second glass wouldn't hurt.

Roarke cleared his throat before looking at his friends.

“I have already told Jane, but wanted to share with you gents, too,” he announced. “I will not be participating in Jane’s Questioning. Instead I will be serving as her second.”

“Well that’s a sneaky as fuck way of trying to get into her pants,” Finn laughed. “I don’t think it’ll work for you, Roar.”

“That is not— I am not— I would never— that is to say...” Roarke muttered, seeming flustered at the idea of impropriety. “I am not trying to get into her pants!”

“Anyone else bowing out early?” Finn asked the group.

“I’ll be putting my name in for Jane, I guess,” Daire stated before blowing out his breath in an exaggerated huff and crossing his arms. “I suppose I could tolerate her for a month.”

Jane didn’t know whether to laugh or be offended at Daire’s response. Tolerate her? How generous of him. Jane rolled her eyes to herself.

Kiernan merely nodded, everyone already aware of his intentions.

“I’ll let Fate decide,” Seamus whispered, looking over to Jane with a shy smile. “I’ll say yes to Jane if it comes to me.”

“Does anyone want to share what kinds of questions they ask of me to build my profile?”

“Normal stuff,” Finn answered, shaking his hand like it’s nothing. “Preferences, mostly. How young you like your men. How tall. How big you like his cock to be. The usual.”

“WHAT?” Jane screeched. “They do NOT ask me about my preferred cock size to help narrow down my perfect man. WAIT. Yes they *should* ask me about my preferred cock size to help narrow down my perfect man. If it’s my perfect man and all, why not?”

By the end of her ramble, Seamus and Roarke were both blushing a deep crimson, Kiernan was smirking as if his cock was over a foot long, Daire was glaring at her, and Finn? Finn was guffawing. There was no other word for the obnoxiously

loud laugh he was letting loose. It made her smile even as it grated on her nerves.

Yes, his energy level might be a bit too elevated for me.

Jane started yawning. Not long after that, the group agreed they were ready for bed. On the way out of the study, Jane asked one last question.

“Am I really supposed to choose a preferred cock size? Be honest now, because I want to put some real thought into it if it’s needed.”

The guys all burst out laughing, but Jane hadn’t been joking.

If she was asked to specify cock size, should she just put ‘the bigger, the better’? Yes.

But what if all fae men are really packing foot-long subs in their pants?

CHAPTER FOUR

JANE WOKE UP on a cloud. Not an *actual* cloud, but on the bed that was so fluffy and silk-lined that she felt like she was sleeping on a cloud for real. She went through her wardrobe, expanded thanks to the queen, and selected an airy, casual day dress in a dark eggplant purple. With capped sleeves, a modest round neckline, and a skirt that stopped at her knees, it looked sweet from the front. The back was like all of the Fae dresses, though, completely backless and scandalous for the amount of naked skin Jane showed where others boasted beautiful wings of varying colors.

Jane wished again that she had wings, too. They were so beautiful. Delicate and intricate but vivid, too. Jane sighed as she made it down to the Morning Room for breakfast. She was surprised to see only the royal family there, with one additional guest.

The new fae was an average-looking man besides the bright neon-pink wings that boasted intricate multi-colored swirls all over. These were the first wings she'd seen with flashy patterns. She wanted to reach out and run her finger along the swirling patterns, but she kept her hands to herself, not knowing the protocol about touching someone else's wings. She made a mental note to ask more about wings and whether or not they could be touched.

The guy was about 5'7" with dark eyes, dark hair, and dark stubble on his chin. That's where the average ended. He'd moussed his hair back, so it looked almost windswept away from his forehead. He had thick tortoiseshell glasses and was wearing a bright pink shirt that was sneakily a halter top to allow for his wings.

"There's our darling!" He spoke loudly and his animated face lit up when she walked in the room. His grin was so

contagious, she couldn't stop her return smile even if she wanted to. He reminded her of a teddy bear, infinitely cuddle-able and sweet as sugar in his genuine friendliness.

"I'm Jane," she introduced herself.

"Well, hello, Darling," he gushed. "I'm Thomas. I'm here to help you shine through your Questioning. My family has worked with the royals for all of our lives. Used to be both courts, so we had more to do. Not that I'm complaining. I'm blessed to be able to follow my passions. I've been the producer on Questionings for more than a few years now."

"Producer?"

"Yes, I make sure everything goes smoothly and our magic picks up what's needed so anyone can watch."

"WATCH?" Jane glanced quickly at the royal family. "No one mentioned this was done with an audience."

"We make it available for people to view through mirroring," the queen stated matter-of-factly. "It's not for entertainment. It is an opportunity for our people to witness transparency in our practices."

Jane looked back at Thomas, who was looking at the queen like she'd sprouted feathery duck wings in place of her regal, shimmering midnight-blue ones.

"Everyone who's anyone watches all of the Questionings," he whispered to Jane. "And most everyone finds them very entertaining no matter what the royals tell themselves about transparency."

"You don't participate in the Questionings yourself anymore?"

"Oh, Darling, no," he chuckled out. "I like the company of other males and not females. I have no need to go through any females' questioning when I can just go through the street with a sign stating OPEN FOR BUSINESS instead."

Jane giggled with him.

"But it's my job to showcase you in your absolute best light, so that when the time comes for your next questioning,

even more males are vying for the chance to spend time with you. We want you to have your pick of the eligible fae males. Looking like you do, though, Darling, I don't think we'll need to do much work."

Jane heard a loud thunk and turned to see Kiernan with his hand fisted around a fork on the table. He was holding the fork so tightly that his fist was turning white around the edges.

"Perhaps this will be her only Questioning," Kiernan growled.

"She might be going back to the human realm when her portal is located and active," Roarke agreed as he took a bite of a delicious-looking pastry. Kiernan looked even more grumpy at his addition, if that was possible.

"Either way," Thomas shrugged, "We'll have you looking pretty as a fairy princess."

Jane felt that nagging pulsing in her back again, so she shrugged her shoulders forward and back a few times.

"Are you alright?" Kiernan asked, noticing her discomfort.

"I'm sure I'm fine," she answered. "Maybe I slept funny or something."

"You'll be perfection, I'm sure," Thomas rolled on. "Let's get started on your profile so we can move things along, shall we? Did you want to go somewhere more private? It almost seems unfair if Kiernan and Roarke get to hear what you put in your profile before the cut off for updating their own."

Roarke quickly jumped in.

"I will not be participating."

"Oh! And Kiernan hasn't participated in years, so I supposed it's alright to just do it here." Thomas was like a snowball rolling down a hill. Once he began, nothing could stop him. Well, nothing but Kiernan, it seemed.

"I will be pursuing Jane's affections," Kiernan spoke up. Thomas looked up, obviously surprised.

“Privacy, it is,” the queen sang. “Jane, please, take a plate with some breakfast.”

“I’ll help her carry her breakfast,” Kiernan stated, immediately standing and ushering her to a small but full breakfast buffet on the side of the room. He stepped in close, making her heart flutter wildly. Why was he so damn hot? Even his growly attitude that anyone else would find off-putting was somehow attractive to her. “Would you like some coffee or juice? I can carry that for you easily enough.”

“Juice, please,” she answered. “I’ve never gotten a taste for coffee.”

“I thought all the humans drank coffee,” he responded. “Mother had them make coffee especially for you.”

“Oh! I guess I can have a cup then?”

“Of course not. If you don’t like it, don’t drink it. I’ll let her know coffee isn’t something you care for so it won’t be here again. I’ll get you a glass of each kind of juice and you can discover which ones you like. Maybe pick a favorite.”

He sounded almost sweet. Especially at the end. Maybe a little shy. Jane found it endearing and decided she wanted to get to know this Kiernan.

“That’d be great, Kiernan, thank you.” She didn’t understand why he was suddenly acting so.. nice. Last night, he barely spoke to her and growled his way through the evening when he did speak. Today he’s solicitous. *Why?* Jane felt like she had a bunch of pieces of Kiernan’s puzzle and none of them fit each other.

Did it matter, anyway? She had other things to worry about than one guy out of hopefully many that might want to.. court her? Was that the right word? Too bad he’s the one guy on her mind right now. How quickly her brain forgot Finn, Seamus, and Daire in the presence of Kiernan. She forcibly ejected the prince from her thoughts and focused on filling up her plate.

Jane was once again puzzled by the strangely beautiful fae food. She selected a pastry and something that looked like bacon, along with some eggs that were an ominous brown

color. When she turned to the door, Kiernan was standing there with a tray. The tray boasted five crystal glasses each holding a different brightly-colored liquid. They started walking down the hall; she assumed Kiernan was leading her to Thomas.

“I can tell you the name of each juice now? Actually, when you’re done with Thomas, if you tell me which colors of juice you enjoyed, I’ll tell you which is which. I’m interested to hear which you favor.”

“That’s so nice you, Kier— er, Prince Kiernan?” She hadn’t meant to end that on a question mark, but she wasn’t sure what to call him. It seemed odd to call him Prince Kiernan if they could be dating soon. Or whatever they called it here. They arrived at a smaller room with a few couches and she could see Thomas inside.

“You only need to call me Prince Kiernan when we’re in public, Jane,” he murmured, looking intensely into her eyes. His lips widened into a sly grin that made her feel like she finally had wings. In her stomach, anyway.

Then he took one finger and booped her on the nose as he fired a parting shot.

“For now.”

Jane’s mouth dropped open in surprise— he *booped* her!— and she stood in the doorway watching his fine ass saunter back down the hall without looking back. Even his wings were sexy, the dark charcoal grey that made her think of silk sheets and naughty nights. She jumped a little, caught out in her staring, when a voice spoke right next to her ear.

“I saw that,” Thomas taunted. “While you pull up the panties he made fall right off, should I just fill out your preference sheet myself with a whole lotta Prince Kiernan facts?”

Jane fanned her face as she laughed at Thomas’ words.

“I mean, maybe,” she answered. “I don’t know. Is he always so capricious?”

“Capricious? Darling, you can’t use big words like that with me. Is that the human word for being absolutely full of

himself, but it still kind of works for him?”

“That’s not what capricious means,” Jane managed to get out in between her laughter. “It’s like... hot and cold. Someone that flashes between moods quickly and often. What you’re trying to say is that he’s got BDE.”

“BDE?”

“Oh yeah, definitely,” Jane said through laughter. “When that cockiness somehow works for them? Humans call it Big Dick Energy. That man has BDE just dripping out of his pores.”

Thomas tilted his head to the side and squinted as he considered her question.

“I don’t know,” he finally answered. “I’ve only seen him participate in one Questioning and he doesn’t really spend time in my circles, if you know what I mean.”

“Like, with other males?”

“No,” he laughed, “like, out having fun. I don’t know about every male in our realm, but our people do take note of when any royals participate in a Questioning. Ever since he stepped into some of his royal duties, he’s been notably absent. Prince Roarke normally participates, though. Anyway, let’s go ahead and begin on your profile. I can hardly wait to meet your perfect mate.”

“Riiiiight. I’m just hoping for a friend I can live with, okay? Let’s lower the bar.”

“Lower the bar? Do I look like the kind of person who lowers the bar? Absolutely not. We’ll aim for a Fate Bond because true love is everything. Basics first, though. Let’s start with your full name, birthday and basic measurements/features.”

“I’m 5’2” and I weigh 108 pounds.” Jane shrugged. “Do you use pounds here?”

“My magic will automatically convert anything from your measurements into ours. Just go right ahead.”

“Umm.. I’ve got dark brown eyes and my sister always said my hair color reminded her of a Skor, her favorite candy bar, because it looks like chocolate toffee. I’ll turn 22 on May 14th.”

“And your full name, Darling.”

“Jane Winter.”

Thomas looked up at her in surprise.

“Winter? Truly?”

“Yep.”

“Well aren’t you just a fairy princess.”

Jane shrugged her shoulders to soothe the ache that had started back up between her shoulder blades. It was happening again. That trip through the portal must have pulled a muscle.

“I can fill in the remaining physical attribute questions. I have eyes. Give me just a moment.”

Jane tapped her feet on the ground in a random melody as she waited. She started wondering what kind of competitions she’d have in her Questioning.

She’d need to choose what kind of man— male? Fae? Ugh. She’d call them men and they’d like it, she decided. They couldn’t possibly expect her to learn an entirely new vernacular overnight. But yes, she’d need to choose whether she was looking for a friend to spend the next however many weeks or, gulp, months with or if she wanted to go head-first down this rabbit hole and give love a real chance. Be honest down to her toes about what she thought her soulmate might be like.

Because if she was looking for a great roommate, a cooking competition was a fabulous idea. Throw in a cleaning competition and a questionnaire about the kind of music they preferred and she’d find an awesome roommate.

But if she was looking for true love, if she could let herself hope and wish and try, that wouldn’t be the kind of thing she’d focus on.

“Okay,” Thomas cut into her train of thought. “Let’s see what you’re looking for in a male. We can start with—”

“Are you really going to ask me for a preferred cock size?” Jane blurted out, accidentally interrupting Thomas in her rush to ask the question weighing on her mind. “Now that I know this is entertainment for public consumption... I’m not sure what details I’m comfortable making public. My ideal length of a penis seems more like private information.”

Thomas was looking at her with eyes as wide as saucers, immediately clueing her in that she would not, in fact, be sharing her idea of a perfect penis with the public. Deep, hearty laughter bloomed into the space as Thomas started laughing, clutching his chest and bending with the force of it. A blush rose into her cheeks, making her feel overly warm in embarrassment.

“I don’t mean to laugh,” Thomas managed, “but I swear males can be such buffoons. And I am one, so I’d know. That really wasn’t very nice of your new friends. No, Darling. We won’t be discussing your—” Thomas chuckled again, “—ideal penis length. Unless you want to gossip about it over tea later. But I swear it isn’t part of your profile. How about we start with the ideal age of your mate? I’ll want to know a generous range so we don’t accidentally exclude your soul mate, though. For example, when I ask about his age, a fifteen-year age gap might not be your perfect ideal, but with the right male, perhaps it’s an option. A forty-year age gap might never be an option for you, though. Those parameters are what I’m looking for.”

Could she date someone younger than her? She felt like she’d been ancient before she was an adult with the life she’d lived. There was a fine line between fun-loving and immature. An important line for Jane.

“I’d like to eliminate anyone under 20 years old,” she said with a firm nod, still thinking she’d rather someone older. But how old is too old? She thought about the example Thomas had given her. Older wouldn’t be difficult for her, with the right man. What number would push the limits for her without giving false hope to someone? “Let’s do 40 years old as the

top end, please. That'd be close to a 20-year age gap and I don't think I'd be able to handle more than that."

"Height?"

"Taller than me, please."

"Honey, you're a tiny little sapling. Most everyone is taller than you," he said with a wink. "Is there such a thing as too tall?"

Jane thought about a tall, handsome stranger leaning down to fold her in his arms. She imagined tilting her face up for a kiss. She saw Kiernan's bright eyes looking down at her. Shit. She shook her head to clear the image.

"Nope. And weight isn't an issue. Neither is hair color or eye color."

"What about wing color?"

"Umm... do the color of someone's wings mean something?"

"Of course! The darker the color, the darker the soul. See my bright pink, here? I live firmly in the light."

Jane covered her open mouth with her hand in surprise as she thought of the varied colors of wings she'd seen since her arrival. The entire royal family had darker colored wings. The king's were a deep navy blue while Queen Melody's wings were a sparkling midnight color. Roarke's were the color of dark denim. And Kiernan!

"But Prince Kiernan's wings are a dark, charcoal grey," she whispered, eyes focused on nothing as she flipped through mental images in her mind. "Is he a dark fairy or something? Are there dark fairies?!"

Oh god. Someone should have told her. But who would that have been? The royal family wouldn't announce that they were evil, would they? Jane felt her heart beat pick up and her breathing get heavier. She turned her eyes back to Thomas.

He was stifling laughter! His shoulders were shaking and his eyes were crinkled in mirth at her expense.

“I’m s-s-s-sorry!” he got out between laughter, “but when was an opportunity like that going to come around again? I just had to!” He calmed himself down and tried to look apologetic. It looked more like he was constipated as he was using every ounce of his will not to laugh. “The wing colors don’t mean anything. Although wings of family members tend to be in similar color families.”

Thomas paused and seemed to talk to himself, his head bobbing from side to side for a moment before he rolled his hands around in a rewind motion.

“Unless they’re fate bonded. It’s *incredibly rare*, as in I don’t know when the last fate bond has even been seen, but if you see a fated pair, they’ll have matching wings. The shade and designs are a blending of their birth wings. It’s been too long since we’ve seen a fated pair.”

“Their wings just... poof? Change?”

“Pretty much,” he nodded. “I’ve never seen it. But I’ve heard some of my elders say there’s a defining moment when it happens. It’s when both people have truly admitted to themselves the depth of their feelings. Once acknowledged, their love grows exponentially until it cannot be contained inside the body any longer. So it escapes into their wings, merging the wing designs of each mate to show everyone their hearts are promised to another. That they’ve found their true mate.”

“That’s beautiful.”

Thomas nods in agreement.

“I’ve always thought so, too,” he said with a smile. “Anyway. Wing color is the same as a preferred hair color here in the Fae Realm. Darling, if you don’t give me something to work with, every male in your 20-year age range will show up when they see your photo on their crystal.”

“Well, is it just physical traits right now?”

“Sometimes, but apparently our females are pickier than humans. Your profile is meant to be your only chance for physical input on the males. From this point on, you won’t

know which men you are eliminating at any given time. The eliminations are blind in that way. Now, some years additional traits are mentioned in the profile phase. You could specify a required skill if you like. Or perhaps an interest in a specific hobby?"

"I'd prefer they didn't have any children yet, but were interested in the possibility of starting a family in the future."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"I'm not sure how schooling works here, but I'd like someone I can talk to. Someone intelligent that enjoys conversations. Maybe someone that likes to read? I've always secretly wanted someone to read beside me on a rainy day."

"That's perfect, Jane," Thomas said with a smile that reached up to his eyes and caused crinkles there with its enthusiasm. "Truly. A great start that should narrow it down nicely with the addition of a hobby and schooling level."

"And these men can't lie?"

"No, their profiles are already completed. They're able to update them at any time other than during the 24 hours before a Questioning begins. The notification was sent out last night that the 24 hour update blackout would begin this morning. Everything you've specified is in there already to match or not match based on what you're saying now."

"So these men randomly say they like to read and it'll show up as a match? What if they like to read and don't mention it?"

"Our males are used to this process, Darling," Thomas soothes. "There's a section for hobbies and most men put in absolutely everything they enjoy even a little bit for scenarios just like this. There are steep penalties for lying in your profiles, too, so that almost never happens."

"So what next?"

"I've just marked your profile complete. I'll bring this crystal into the royal archives and have it work through possible pairings. It's nearly instantaneous. You'll want to work on your initial ten questions so we can add that in. The

queen wants to work on that with you, so after you two are finished, I can upload that and send it off. Then, every male that fits your criteria will be notified and offered the opportunity to accept your invitation.”

“Okay, well, how many do you think will accept?”

“It changes each time. I’ve never seen less than a 65% acceptance rate, though, and Jane, I’m telling you. You’re a gorgeous female. I think you’ll have a record response. Let me take you to Queen Melody. I got a mirror that she’s waiting for you in the family garden.”

Jane felt like a ping pong ball being bounced from place to place and person to person. She was happy to go see Melody, though. The queen seemed straightforward, with very little artifice, and that comforted Jane in this realm surrounded by new things and new experiences.

“I’ll need to remind the queen,” Thomas muttered to himself as they walked down the hall, “that the makeover will begin before lunch.”

Jane stopped in her tracks and flinched. Fairy man says what now?

“Did you say makeover?”

CHAPTER FIVE

JANE FOLLOWED THOMAS through the castle, getting lost in the turns and turrets within moments. She was surprised at all the people bustling through the corridors. The royal family lived here. Did they enjoy being surrounded by people all the time? Not that they probably have much choice in the matter.

“Yes,” Thomas answered simply when she repeated her question about a makeover. “The queen thought you would enjoy the pampering and besides, your wardrobe needs to be expanded for your time here.”

Jane couldn't help feeling awkward. She'd always, *always* paid her own way. Maybe she couldn't buy nice things, but what she had, she'd earned. She felt like an urchin picked up off the street. Pitied.

“Thomas, I'm not sure I feel comfortable with the queen buying me all of these things. She couldn't possibly do that for the other girls that go through The Questioning.”

Thomas stopped in the middle of the hallway and turned to her, taking both of her hands in his.

“Now, Jane,” he said with a stern frown. “I won't hear of it and neither would the queen. We haven't had a human here in the realm for longer than I've been alive. You being here, the possibilities you represent for our males... you represent hope for our people right now. It's in the royal family's best interest that you enjoy your time here so that maybe you'll choose to stay and say nice things to anyone you know in the human realm.”

“If that's not enough,” he continued, “I know for a fact that the queen has always longed for a daughter. It's a mother's place to assist their daughter through her Questionings and the

queen hasn't had that joy. Allow her to spoil you. I think it might be good for you both."

"Roarke has offered to stand with me as my second. Is that normally the place of a mother?"

"No, that's a separate spot. Mothers help with more of the preparations. Wardrobe, your initial ten questions, choosing the rounds of The Questioning. Your second is your sounding board while making your actual eliminations. Think of it like this: Your mother will help you create the maze all the males must go through for you and make sure you put your best foot forward during the creation. Your second helps you actually navigate the maze with the males. Your producer, me, makes sure that everyone looks good while doing it all and that every detail is accounted for with no mistakes. With the queen and Roarke by your side, and can I say myself as well, you don't need to worry for a minute. Try to have fun with it all instead."

Thomas tugged gently on Jane's hands before turning and walking beside her once again. Jane told herself to relax and not let her worries creep into what could be an amazing experience. She didn't have to be the responsible, worry-fraught Jane who had to remember each month which of her utility services were at risk of cut off for nonpayment. Her biggest worry could be what dessert to have with her decadent dinner, if only she allowed herself to be fully present in this incredible new world where no one had worries about basic survival. She could breathe here.

They arrived at a great wooden door with a beautiful flowers and vines motif. Thomas pulled on the heavy copper handle and Jane gasped aloud at what lay in front her. The royal garden was like nothing she'd ever seen. It looked like they were walking into a huge tunnel of flowers. Vines and flowers arched overhead, almost blocking out the sky and sunlight. A soft carpet of grass stretched beneath their feet. It looked like the hedges had been used as tables of all sizes to hold giant wooden buckets where flowers tumbled down in a cascading waterfall. Speaking of which, as they turned a corner, a tiny sparkling stream flowed from an actual

waterfall. That's where they found the queen, in a small stone-covered opening in front of the waterfall.

“Queen Melody, I've completed Jane's profile and am ready to turn her over into your capable hands. I've been asked to remind you that the seamstresses you've requested will be here in about an hour to prepare Jane's wardrobe.”

Jane was surprised to see Thomas converse so casually with the queen after her formal introduction yesterday in the throne room. At times, it seemed like the fae realm was a replica of the human realm, but it was clear she didn't fully understand any of the royal protocols. Jane hoped she didn't make any unforgivable missteps during her time here.

“Thank you, Thomas,” Melody smiled. “Everything is always on schedule when you're involved. I'll make sure Jane and I get everywhere we need to be today. My crystal should alert me with fifteen minutes to spare for each of our appointments, so I don't think we'll need your company again until after dinner, when Jane is revealed to the populace for the initial selection. I'll mirror the questions to you once we've completed them.”

Thomas nodded respectfully to the queen and flashed Jane a sincere smile with a wink before leaving them. The queen was sitting at a small garden table where a single chair stood empty. The queen gestured to it with a warm smile. Jane sat and fidgeted uncomfortably for a moment before telling herself again to sit up straight and breathe. She wasn't a nervous person. She was a fake-it-til-you-make-it person and she'd be damned if she let her nerves get the better of her now when they never had before.

“How did the profile go?”

“Successful, I think.”

“I would assume so, Jane, if Thomas brought you to me,” she laughed, her feminine giggle tinkling like a clear bell. “He's too good at his job to bring you here without completing his tasks. I was asking more if the process was painful for you.”

“Oh, no,” she answered with an unladylike shrug. “It was easy.”

“I’m glad. Did Thomas tell you what to expect for today?”

“Some of it,” Jane answered. “I think everyone knows to only share the information needed to make informed decisions right now so I don’t lose my mind and crack down the middle like an egg.”

“I do know that this is a lot and very fast,” the queen said with a sympathetic smile. “I think you’re handling all of this quite gracefully, my dear.”

“Thank you,” Jane smiled, feeling warm all over from the compliment that sounded almost maternal and elicited a sense of pride within her chest.

“It’s traditional to go through a bit of a makeover with each Questioning, but I’ve added time with a few seamstresses into yours so that you’ve got some clothes to call your own. I’m hoping you enjoy clothing. I always have and haven’t had a female to go through fittings with for many years.”

“Your Majesty—”

“Melody,” the queen inserted formally. “It’s just us.”

“I wanted to ask, that is, in human storybooks about fairies...”

“You can ask me anything you like, Jane,” the queen said after Jane let the silence drag on.

“Do fae age the same as humans?”

The queen laughed loudly this time. “Yes. We age as the humans do. Our measurement of time was adopted from American humans. I thought you were worried about how to tell me you hate clothes shopping.”

“I don’t know if I would say that I hate or enjoy clothing,” Jane deflected before forcing herself to be straightforward instead. “Honestly, I’ve never had the opportunity to enjoy clothing. I couldn’t afford it. I’ve always appreciated fashion, while I can’t say I have any talent with it considering the complete lack of practice.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to spending this time with you. Before we get to any of that, though, we need to discuss the facets of your Questioning. Did Thomas discuss this at all?”

“Only that it’s normally a mother’s job to help build the Questioning. But I wondered what happens for females that don’t have a mother who can step in.”

“Normally an older relative or friend of the family would step in for them. Unfortunately, you don’t have any family here to step in.”

“I don’t have any family at all, anywhere.”

The queen turned sad eyes on Jane.

“And a bigger tragedy doesn’t exist than being alone without family, in either realm. I was hoping you might let me step into that role for you while you’re here. It would be my honor and pleasure, Jane.”

Jane looked at the queen. Saw her imploring eyes and how she leaned over the table to rest a hand on top of Jane’s.

“I’m pretty sure the honor is mine, Melody,” Jane said sincerely.

The queen’s smile blossomed at her words and she gave Jane’s hand a gentle squeeze before sitting back into her chair.

“Right then. I thought we’d start with your ten questions since those are needed first. Then you’ll choose what you’re looking for in your elimination rounds. We’ll also devise a few open-ended questions to use as needed to help bring you down to a final choice. We don’t have much time, so let’s jump right in.”

“Sounds great.”

“So the very first round begins as soon as they accept the invitation into your Questioning. Literally. They tap the area marked ‘accept’ on their crystal and a ten-question quiz with yes-or-no answers pops up immediately. Their answers will need to match all of ten of yours in order to be invited to the castle ballroom for the next round. It normally eliminates a large number quickly, so we’re not inundated with people here

in the castle. So let's talk about things that would make you turn a male away."

"Like if he chews too loudly?"

"That's a bit too subjective," the queen said with a small laugh. "Think bigger and more concrete. Something like 'Do you want children someday?'"

"But that's gone into my profile."

"Oh, did it? And are you hoping for children or making sure they do not want children, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Hoping for children," Jane answered with a blush that she didn't understand. This shouldn't make her blush. "So, something more permanent and life-altering. I'm not sure where to begin. Your world is so different than mine."

"Let's start easy. Is it okay if your male enjoys the company of other males? In the past or while you're together? Fae can be quite open sexually and often enjoy occasional romps outside of their bonds as long as both partners are amenable. How do you feel about multiple partners in your bedroom?"

"Um, I don't care if he is bisexual, but if he's with me, he needs to be with only me. No occasional romps outside of my relationships, please. And multiple partners is also a hard no."

"I'd also ask whether they had unresolved feelings for someone else. That would be an issue were it me. What about a permanent mate bond?"

"Yes, unresolved feelings for an ex would be a huge no-no. And I guess I'd want them to at least be open to a permanent mate bond. But I'd think all males would be."

"You'd be wrong, dear." Melody's fingers were moving around her crystal as they spoke. Before Jane could ask if she was taking notes or doing something else, Melody asked another question. "Would you say you're a romantic? Do you want a romantic partner?"

"Yes, I'd want a romantic partner. And I'd want them to know how to enjoy their time both together and apart. I think

I'm too used to being alone to ever want someone on top of me every minute of every day."

"So they'd need their own hobbies."

"Exactly. If they don't enjoy themselves alone, they'll expect me to entertain them. That's just not who I am."

"What about mind-altering substances?"

"Well I'd need to make sure that wasn't the only thing they consumed."

"But sometimes is okay?"

"Yes, sometimes would be okay. In moderation or not at all."

"Do you want to sleep in the same bed as your mate? Most of our females prefer to sleep alone until they've permanently mate-bonded, but I remember being told that's not the case for humans."

"I think I'd enjoy not sleeping alone, so yes, that could be asked. And I'm kind of a psycho about keeping my space tidy. I think someone that was perpetually messy would drive me crazy. It wouldn't need to be spotless all the time, but most of the time would be nice."

"Okay. Well, that's ten," Melody handed her crystal over to Jane. "Take a look and confirm I accurately input both your questions and answers, please, before we send them to Thomas. I can easily make any changes necessary, so please don't be shy."

Do you require an open relationship to meet your needs?

<NO>

Do you prefer multiple partners to enhance the sexual experience? <NO>

Do you have any unresolved romantic feelings towards anyone? <NO>

Are you open to a permanent mate bond? <YES>

Would you enjoy doing romantic things for your mate? <YES>

Would you enjoy spending equal time alone and together? <YES>

Do you have a hobby that you're passionate about? <YES>

Do you believe mind-altering substances should be used in moderation if at all? <YES.

Would you enjoy sharing a bed with your mate for sleeping? <YES>

Is it important to you that your home is clean most of the time? <YES>

“It all looks perfect, Melody,” Jane said sincerely, scooting the crystal across the table to the queen.

“And you believe that if someone answers any of these questions with a different response than what we've entered, that they couldn't possibly be a perfect match for you?”

“Yes, actually,” Jane nodded musingly. “I do.”

“Then we'll send these off and move right on.”

While the queen's fingers sped around the crystal again, Jane felt herself grow more excited about the possibilities The Questioning offered. She thought maybe she could actually find someone. Even if she didn't find the perfect someone right away, she figured this was a better way of doing things than the humans with their swiping and dating based purely on looks. With The Questioning, looks figured in for a moment, but beyond that, it was about everything other than looks.

“So traditionally, each of your continuing rounds are based on a trait you believe to be most important in a romantic relationship. Can you tell me what you think is needed for a successful match with you?”

Jane breathed in slowly, taking a moment to really consider the question from the queen. She didn't have many examples of wonderful, successful relationships in her life. But what would be needed for her to feel safe, loved, and like the relationship might have a chance of lasting forever?

“Honesty,” Jane said solemnly. “I can’t abide by someone who might lie. I think I have enough trust issues considering my father left the second he found out about me.”

“That’s a fairly common round that we can handle in multiple ways. I’ll make sure it’s added.”

“How?”

“I will come up with these rounds on your behalf with a little help from magic and from Thomas, but I promise, only those who prove their honesty will move forward. What else?”

“Loyalty. For the same reasons. I don’t want someone who could abandon me. Or their child.”

“I understand. That will be a new round to create. Interesting,” Melody smiled an almost-evil little grin. “I have an idea, though.”

“What is that look for, Melody? You look so sneaky!”

“All of these rounds are sneaky, Jane. How could you test someone on a character trait if they knew it was being tested? It would skew the results. Rounds are designed to look as though multiple things could be the chosen trait so that the males show true reactions.”

“I don’t know if that’s genius or a little bit overboard.”

“As Queen, I’ll say genius,” Melody grinned. “One more trait, please. Three tends to be the preferred number, unless you cannot come up with another or have more than one you feel should be attended to.”

“Just one more, then. Communication. If he can’t share his thoughts, his feelings, his needs with me, how can we make each other happy?”

“Just so,” the queen nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I think these will work quite nicely together, but perhaps in a different order so as to eliminate the sheer number of likely men more efficiently. Yes.”

A chime sounded from the crystal in the queen’s hands.

“We still need to discuss your final-round questions, but it’s time to meet with the seamstresses we’ve arranged. Follow me, please.”

The queen stood and waited for Jane to do the same before moving towards the same door where Jane came into the garden earlier. Melody took her back through the castle, passing through some now-familiar hallways towards an entirely new wing. It looked different than any other room she’d be in so far. It was less shiny, less opulent, and far more utilitarian. There were no windows; the room was lit only by crystal-light, but it was no darker within for the difference. There were reams upon reams of fabric, and some odd-looking wooden contraptions that Jane figured must belong to the seamstresses.

Two men and a woman stood when they entered and gave deep bows or a curtsy to the queen before turning to Jane. The stout woman had a heavily lined face, ruddy cheeks, and orangey-yellow wings. She stepped towards Jane and gestured her over to a small raised dais.

“I’m Fiona and a hearty welcome to you, Jane. I’ll take your measurements here and then you can talk to my mate, Tadgh, about what you’re hoping we can make for you.”

Fiona ushered the men into another room and asked Jane to strip her clothes off.

“Seriously?” Jane asked, looking at the queen for confirmation. She’d already played the gullible fool today, and would prefer not to do it naked on her second time. But Melody nodded at her.

“She needs your body’s measurements, Jane, not measurements of you with your clothes on.”

“Right.”

Jane stripped down and stood confidently on the dais, even though she wished she wasn’t naked in front of a queen and still felt slightly insecure about how she was the only one in the realm without wings. Wait. Was she?

“Did any humans get stuck here when the portals closed?”

“No,” the queen answered absently while touching some of the fabric stacked along one of the long tables. “The humans already had the rights our females were fighting for so those that were here left with the females in solidarity.”

Jane slumped a bit in disappointment. Jane wasn't sure she liked being the only unicorn in a field full of horses. Or more like the only horse in a field full of unicorns. It's not that she thought so little of herself. It's just that Jane was used to being more invisible. She didn't love being watched all the time without a spare moment to herself.

Fiona tapped her shoulders impatiently while grumbling under her breath, clearly intending for Jane to stand up straight again so she could get proper measurements. Jane corrected her posture as her mind wandered, thinking about the fae realm and everything she'd seen here. She wondered, again, if she'd lost her mind.

The queen cut into her musings.

“I was thinking perhaps five new dresses, with matching undergarments, of course. We'll also need two swimming dresses, and a coverup for both. Three nightgowns. Oh. And ten sets of lingerie. We'll be ordering some shoes, as well, once the outfits are complete.”

“That seems like...” Jane started to protest, “wait, TEN sets of lingerie?”

Jane had been measured, poked, and prodded for what felt like days before she was able to sit down with Tadgh and the queen to talk about the different outfits the queen wanted made for Jane. Jane learned that the other man in the room was Connor, the son of Tadgh and Fiona, who helped them with their business. He couldn't stop blushing every time he looked at Jane, so she figured he was new to The Questionings, if he'd been to any at all. She wondered if he would qualify for hers, and hoped he wouldn't, for no other reason than he was so shy and nervous that Jane felt like she'd accidentally eat the young man for breakfast.

She let Melody do most of the talking since all of the clothing sent to her room had been gorgeous and the queen

selected all of it. Jane didn't know much about fashion anyway and she'd said as much to the queen. She did get into the spirit of things after a bright flash caught her attention from the corner of the room. Jane stared with her mouth hanging open as clothes seemed to flash into existence out of nowhere at all.

Tadgh took pity on her, though, and explained that Fiona was using her magic to speed along the creation of the garments. Once they were complete, Connor flashed them onto the racks with his own magic. The queen ushered her into the corner with the racks and pointed out a small space for changing, encouraging Jane to try things on.

Jane did, loving the feel of the dresses. She came out to show Melody each item of clothing and had fun discussing what she liked and what needed alteration. Fiona completed the queen's list and was able to join them, altering things as they went, even as they were still on Jane's body. Jane was amazed at the magic, at the beauty, at the fun.

Jane felt like she'd been smiling for ages, giggling over the clothes and how Fiona could make any adjustment Melody suggested. After spinning a few times in one final, fuller-skirted dress, Jane was dizzy and slightly out of breath. And grinning madly.

"So what did you think?" Melody said, smiling brightly at Jane after the queen's crystal chimed, indicating it was time to leave for another appointment. They walked down their current hallway, just a few rooms away, talking the whole time.

"That was really fun, Melody," Jane enthused. "I didn't know clothes could be so much fun, honestly."

"I'm glad we got to do it together," Melody responded. "I can't remember the last time I've gotten to enjoy doing something frivolously fun with another female."

Jane admitted easily that finding clothes had been really fun. And spending the time with Melody made it even better. She was knowledgeable but kind, and took Jane's opinions into account more than once.

She could only hope the rest of the makeover would be as fun.

CHAPTER SIX

“DID YOU KNOW I had to ban my son from the royal garden to keep you to myself this afternoon? He was hoping to join us and keep you company, but I am the queen, am I not? I decided to overrule him.”

The queen smiled indulgently.

“Kiernan?” Jane questioned, breath catching.

“No,” the queen responded, measuring Jane’s expression out of the corner of her eye, “Roarke and his friends.”

“Oh, that’s great,” Jane replied too quickly. “I think Roarke and I are going to end up very good friends.”

“And the rest of Roarke’s friends?”

“Yes, all of them.”

“All just friends?” The queen still had her eyes cut to watch Jane’s reaction to her questions.

“Yes, just friends,” Jane said unthinkingly. Her eyes grew wide when she realized what she said. What if The Questioning had her ending up with one of them after she told the queen she only liked them as a friend? Just because Kiernan was taking up all of her mental energy didn’t mean he would be standing at the end of The Questioning. She had to be more careful. “I mean, we’ll have to see how The Questioning all works out, I suppose.”

“What about Kiernan?”

“Oh. Well. I’m surprised he wanted to participate in my Questioning,” Jane fished, trying to be nonchalant. “He didn’t seem to like me very much when we met. He was so quiet. And you said he hadn’t participated in a while.”

“Kiernan is responsible to a fault, Jane,” Melody shared. “And I think he gave up the possibility of love to grow into his role as future king too soon. Perhaps Cormac put too much pressure on my boys. But I think his silence when you two met may have been for a reason other than dislike. I think he didn’t know how to talk to you.”

“What? Why not?”

The queen stopped and looked directly into Jane’s eyes, searching for something. Jane didn’t know what.

“I’ve never seen Kiernan act as he has in the last 24 hours. For the first time in Kiernan’s life, I think he may have seen something, or I should say *someone*, that could be more important to him than his duties to the crown.”

The conversation came to an end as they arrived at their destination. Jane looked around this newest room with as much wonder as the last. It was similar to the first in overall looks with less opulence, no windows, and more function. It was significantly smaller, too, closer to the size of her enormous bedroom here in the castle. There was a large mirror on one wall set behind what looked like a large crowded vanity table. Jane’s eyes flicked over the potion bottles, combs, scissors, and flowers taking up space on the table’s surface. A single metal chair with a burgundy cushioned seat sat in front of the vanity.

There was a small bistro-style table with two chairs in one corner of the room and the queen made her way there after encouraging Jane to sit at the vanity. Jane had barely taken her seat when the door opened to reveal a man who looked a bit like Thomas, bowing to the queen. Jane’s head tilted to the side as she studied not-Thomas.

Not-Thomas was taller than Thomas, closer to 6’. He had Thomas’ dark eyes and hair, but was clean-shaven with a close-cropped haircut. Instead of the dazzling pink of Thomas’ wings, his were what she’d call rosewood, as if someone had taken pink and swirled it with brown. It was surprisingly lovely and somehow masculine while still being pink. She couldn’t stop studying him and he’d clearly noticed.

“I’m Thomas’ brother Liam,” he nodded at her. “You see the family resemblance, I can tell.”

“Older brother?”

“Indeed,” he answered, coming to stand in front of her. “So that I could handle your makeover personally, Thomas bent the rules just the tiniest bit and told me I wouldn’t have made the cut for your Questioning. I’m the best in the realm, thanks to my mother’s tutelage, so Thomas must think you’re quite the lady to make sure I’d be here for you.”

“So you just agreed to abstain on his word?”

“Well, since Thomas would have no interest in any female, when he says I wouldn’t have made your cut, there’d be no reason for him to lie. I think he genuinely likes you, Jane. He knew I’d do a good job and thought you’d be comfortable with me.”

“That’s... really nice of him.”

“Perhaps, but Thomas should be careful letting people know anything of The Questioning ahead of time,” the queen inserted sternly. “He could get in serious trouble for sharing details before they’re released.”

Liam bowed to the queen before answering.

“No details were shared, Your Majesty,” Liam said, still bowing low. “My brother only shared that I wouldn’t be receiving an invitation at all so that I could be here for Jane right now.”

“I understand, Liam,” the queen said, smiling now. “I should have known Thomas wouldn’t break confidentiality. A more professional man you’d be hard-pressed to find.”

Jane looked at Liam curiously, trying to figure out how he missed the mark for her.

“So Jane, how much trust would you like to put in me? How much input do you want in your hair and makeup?” Liam was back to looking at her and was eyeing her hair critically. He turned to the queen. “Your Majesty, do you have any thoughts about Jane’s new look?”

“Trust Liam,” the queen said to Jane.

“I guess I will,” Jane said, throwing out her usual cautious nature at the queen’s encouragement.

“Liam, you’ve handled my hair and makeup personally for years now,” the queen said, as if to further convince Jane. “You’re a gem. Whatever you think might be best, probably will be.”

Liam nodded with a genuine smile at the queen before spinning Jane around. He instructed her to close her eyes before placing something cool over them.

“You won’t be able to open your eyes while this is on, but don’t worry. It reduces dark circles from worry, sleeplessness, and stress. And keeps hair and products out of your eyes as I work. Just relax if you can.”

Jane was surprised to find that she could relax. Whatever Liam was doing, it was soothing. He pulled and tugged at her hair a bit, but not hard enough to be a bother. She heard scissors making their *shnip shnip* sound close to her ears. He put some kind of goop all over her face. She lost track of time as she tracked his movements, but curiosity still nagged at her, making her wonder why Liam didn’t make the cut for her Questioning. He was clearly within the age range and physically met what she’d put down as requirements.

She figured that he either didn’t like to read, didn’t complete his schooling, or didn’t want children. She found she couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“Do you have now or want children someday, Liam?”

“I’d love children, if circumstances allowed. I don’t have any yet, sadly.”

“Did you enjoy your time at school?”

“Absolutely not,” he answered with a laugh. “As soon as my mother allowed me to exchange my schooling for an apprenticeship with her, I dropped out and never looked back.”

Well, that’s one mystery solved. Liam wouldn’t be getting an invitation because he didn’t complete school. Jane started

to worry. She'd eliminated a handsome, kind, hard-working guy that she'd never met because he'd decided to use real-world experience as his schooling? He wasn't unintelligent or lazy. Quite the opposite if he maneuvered his way into an apprenticeship with his mother in exchange for school. Jane felt a little queasy in her stomach at these thoughts.

"And we're all luckier for it," the queen commented.

"We need to let the products and the magic settle now, Jane," Liam said a while later. "The queen herself is preparing a plate for you. As soon as she gets back, I'll remove your eye mask and you can eat, but please don't turn around. I'd rather get your impression of the finished look as a whole. We can make changes needed at that time, but I don't think you'll want to change anything."

"Thank you, Liam," she answered. Then Jane was left alone with her thoughts, waiting on the queen.

What would she do if she ended up with some man she couldn't tolerate for a minute, let alone for however long it would take them to open her portal home?

Should she have focused on finding a solid roommate instead of throwing herself into a ridiculous search for a soul mate? Her New Yorker soul that reveled in facts and truth railed at the daydream she'd allowed herself to chase. She felt more foolish by the moment.

Her entire life had been facing reality before she was ready and making the hard choices in order to survive. Now what had she done? Signed up for win-a-date-with-Jane where she had less control than even Hollywood allowed. And there was no going back.

She felt the eye mask coming off before opening her eyes to realize Liam was bent down in front of her, his eyes leveled directly on hers.

"You've been fidgeting a bit, Jane," he said solemnly, searching her eyes with worry. "Are you alright?"

"I think I may have made a mistake," she whispered. Not quietly enough, though, as the queen came over. Jane heard

bottles clinking as she pushed a plate onto the vanity.

“Oh, no Sweetheart,” the queen pushed Liam back and gave Jane a hug. An honest-to-goodness Mom Hug, like she remembered from when she still had a family. From when she was loved. “It’s all just too much. I thought pushing you through it all quickly would be better, but Cormac said it was too fast. It’s my fault, dearest. I was worried you’d get settled in the castle just in time to uproot you and it would be worse doing it all a second time.”

Queen Melody pulled back from Jane and looked her in the eye. Jane knew that if she thought about everything that was happening, she’d want to cry, and Jane hadn’t allowed herself to cry since the day her mom and sister died and she found out she was alone in the world. So Jane focused on her next steps, as she always did when things got overwhelming or bleak.

The queen nodded at whatever she saw in Jane’s face before her face softened.

“I meant it when I said we wouldn’t force you to do this. We can stop it now, before your image is circulated. I can announce that a mistake was made and that there is no upcoming Questioning. You need to tell me if this is nervous jitters and being overwhelmed with the legitimately frightening situation you’re handling or if this isn’t the right choice for you. I’ll honor your wishes, I swear it.”

“What if...”

“You can ask, Sweetheart,” Melody encouraged. “Don’t let your worries weigh you down. Please ask.”

“What if I hate the man that’s left standing? What if the best men don’t even get the chance because of ridiculous stipulation I’ve put into place? I mean, Liam seems wonderful and I’d already decided he wasn’t for me before I even met him. Melody, this is insane.”

A smile shot across Liam’s face at her compliment, but it dropped as he sucked in a breath when she called the queen by her first name. The queen looked at Liam sharply.

“I’ve asked her to call me Melody in front of friends. We’ll all agree you qualify as a friend and say not a thing more about it.”

Liam nodded silently, still staring at the queen down on her knees with a comforting hand on Jane’s shoulder. The queen refocused on Jane.

“Sweetheart, you’re asking the same questions that every fae female asks. All of us do. It’s the most difficult part of this process, knowing you’re cutting good, amazing males out of a chance at love. Even if they aren’t interested in you or they’re not meant to be your love, it’s difficult that you’re basically telling someone they’re not your choice. It seems cruel. But please allow yourself to hear me. It’s not cruel.”

“It’s not, Jane,” Liam piped up from behind the queen. “No male wants to go through a very public process if he doesn’t even have a chance anyway. It’s kindest to be as honest as possible about your wants and needs. And Thomas wouldn’t lead you astray. Truly. He’s the best man I know.”

“Do you want to know why we selected Thomas to run The Questionings?”

Jane nodded at the queen.

“Thomas believes in the Fate Bonds. Truly, deeply believes that the luckiest people have a Fate Bond out there, waiting to change their wings to match each other. His greatest wish is to find his own Fate Bond, closely followed by helping someone else find theirs.”

“That’d make him happy, to know that’s why you chose him,” Liam grinned.

“He knows,” Queen Melody nodded. “Jane, Liam said it. Thomas wouldn’t lead you astray. And if you hate the man left standing, which has never, *ever* happened before, we’ll let you stay here in the castle instead. We won’t leave you frightened, alone or unhappy somewhere.”

“Thanks,” Jane took a shaky breath and reached deep for a small smile.

“Do you want to cancel?” The queen held her breath as she asked.

Jane thought about it. Thought about saying yes and canceling this entire craziness that seemed to somehow get both more impossible and more real with every passing moment. But then she thought about finding love. Kiernan’s face came into her mind unbidden and she felt a warm little glow. The idea of canceling it all was crushing. She didn’t want to cancel.

“No,” Jane answered, sounding more sturdy and sure in her response. “I think I may have needed that little freak out. Needed to hear you say again that this was my choice. But I really do want to do it. Take the chance and all that.”

The queen leaned into Jane and gave her a little hug. Another Mom Hug. Jane soaked it in and wished it was something she could get used to, could have all the time. It was so nice, being cared about like this.

“Wonderful,” the queen stated before gracefully standing and gliding back to her table in the corner.

Liam handed her the plate from the queen and she nibbled on some of the different offerings on the plate. Most were things she’d seen either at dinner last night or at breakfast this morning. The queen had indeed selected items Jane enjoyed. Jane felt a little warm fuzzy knowing the queen had noticed. Liam hummed as he worked on Jane, using different potions and products that she couldn’t see.

“Alright, Jane, you’ve officially lost your chance to back out of this,” Liam announced, “because I have outdone myself and it would be a crying shame if no one got to see the perfection in front of me.”

Then he turned her around.

Jane couldn’t believe it. She’d always been kind of mousy with dark eyes and dark hair that seemed to wilt a bit. Jane didn’t have time for makeup and primping. While she was working at the restaurant, she was constantly on the move, so she didn’t put too much extra energy into her looks because

she knew she'd sweat it off. But right now, looking at herself, she wished she'd taken the time to learn how to play with makeup. Because she wanted to look like this again and she didn't have a clue how to do it.

Somehow, Liam had enhanced the toffee color in her chocolate hair, turning it almost a shining caramel color that enhanced her dark eyes and the shape of the curls in her hair. She'd never seen defined curls like this on herself. How did he do it?

She realized her mouth was open and that pulled her focus to a new spot. Her mouth looked... lush. A soft, pillowy berry color that seemed to invite a man to nibble. The thought made her blush, bringing an extra ounce of color to her peachy cheeks. But her eyes.. her eyes!

“Are these fake eyelashes?”

“No, I grew yours a little longer. They were already full and thick, just needed some extra length.”

“So you grew them? With magic? How long does it last?”

“Until you ask me to change it?” Liam looked confused. “Magical effects like that are permanent, Jane. The lip color is from a bottle, but it's spelled to last longer. Same with the coloring on your cheeks and the gorgeous amber color on your eyelids. Your eyes stand out so beautifully now.”

And they did. Her eyes looked wide-open and filled with wonder, which she guessed made sense as she looked at herself. She stood and listened as Liam moved her around, posing her before using his crystal to capture some images.

“You look absolutely lovely, Jane,” the queen said proudly. It felt good, hearing the pride in the queen's voice, and filled a spot in her heart that had been empty for too long. Jane let herself imagine a mother figure like Melody in her life permanently. She needed to be careful not to get too attached as the odds weren't in her favor.

Unless her Questioning ended with Kiernan as the last man standing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN THE QUEEN said they were heading back to the royal garden, Jane was able to walk beside her instead of trailing behind like a lost little lamb, as each change of setting made Jane more and more familiar with the castle. It was nice not to feel quite so lost. They made it back to the beautiful table and Jane saw it was set with bite-sized snacks. Her eyes caught on some filled crystal glasses. She was getting tired of not knowing what anything was without being told. She didn't know what was inside the glasses. Was it water? Juice? She must have been obvious in her stare, because before Jane could ask, the queen spoke up.

“It's sparkling water in the glasses. These are a kind of sweet bread. I believe American humans called them cookies. I'm not sure if they still do.”

Jane selected a round brown one that looked like a chocolate chip cookie had been sprinkled with shimmer powder and took a small bite. It wasn't like any cookie Jane had ever eaten. The texture was the same, but the flavor was infinitely richer and more decadent. The flavor was reminiscent of Nutella, but not quite right at the same time. Jane loved it.

“We still have cookies,” Jane stated after she'd finished the delicious fae-cookie-bread. The queen selected her own snack and took a polite bite before focusing her attention on The Questioning.

“So we need to come up with a few open-ended questions for your final rounds. Perhaps five, although they may not all be needed. With the final rounds, you're not coming up with a correct answer, Jane. You'll read each answer given without knowing who wrote them and eliminate based on the actual responses.”

“I understand. That makes sense.”

“Good. Let’s begin then. You came up with your three most important traits for a relationship. Did any others come to mind? That might help.”

“Those were definitely my top three, but others that came to mind were things like forgiving, kind, funny, respectful. Curious and caring. I just don’t think they’re my top three.”

“I understand,” the queen mused aloud. Jane let her mind wander, too, about open-ended questions that might help reveal any of the traits she’d just mentioned.

“Actually, can one of my questions ask what single trait they’d find most important in a partner?”

The queen looked at her, lips slightly parted.

“I can hardly believe it, as it’s an intelligent choice of question, but I don’t recall that ever being asked in any Questioning. Of course that can be one of your questions. We should make that one of your first questions, as we do not know how many men may still be part of the process. It’s easier to read one-word answers like you’re suggesting than lengthy paragraphs.”

“Then let’s have one more like that,” Jane said. “What is your single favorite trait about yourself?”

“I think you’ve got the hang of this.”

“Well I’m all tapped out now, so please don’t stop helping, Melody.”

Jane smiled at the queen, enjoying their time together and the conversation.

“Well, I was considering ‘forgiving’. It might be nice to know how aggressive your males are, as well. What do you think of ‘How would you handle it if someone insulted me in public?’”

“Oh, yes, I like that, too. So that’s three. What else?”

“A commonly asked question is for them to tell you a joke,” the queen stated absentmindedly as she tapped on her

crystal.

“I don’t know about that one. Everyone has their own sense of humor. Both realms would be duller without that variety. Can you think of other types of questions that were used in the past?”

“How about ‘How do you show someone you care?’ There are many different love languages and knowing theirs would be enlightening.”

“That’s a good question.” Jane thought about Connor, the meek son of the seamstress. “Hmm. Could the last one be ‘What would be your response if I asked you to do something that you didn’t want to do?’”

“Very original, Jane. That’s an interesting one. It’s perfect. Do you think these five could help you narrow all the way down to one?”

“I’m not sure. Can you have some past questions available as backup just in case?”

The queen nodded approvingly.

“I think that’s wise. Best to always be prepared.”

“Agreed.”

“I will get your five questions to Thomas and make sure the single-word answers are the first in the list. Then I’ll send along an additional five from past Questionings just in case they’re needed. Did you want to look those over, too?”

“No, I’m hoping I won’t need them. If it comes down to it, will I be able to pick from all five?”

“Yes, definitely. And if you want to change the order of the five we’ve just discussed, you can do that as well. They just need to be logged with Thomas in the first place in order to be used during a Questioning.”

“Okay.”

“I think we have it.”

“So what happens now?”

“Well, you’re free until dinner. Would you like me to send you to the castle spa? They can take off your makeup and give you a facial treatment, you can get a massage, they can remove any unwanted body hair. Those are the normal treatments handled before a Questioning.”

“All of the above?”

“Then I shall drop you there before I head off. Jane, I can’t tell you how much today has meant to me. Thank you for letting me be a part of it.”

“I should be thanking you. It’s been an amazing day and I just know it wouldn’t have been the same without you.”

The queen smiled, clearly pleased with Jane’s response, then led her off into yet another wing of the castle.

Jane spent the afternoon trying different royal spa treatments and enjoying every moment. She’d never had the time or, let’s be honest, the funds to try something like this before and it was incredible. The massage was heavenly. The facial left her face feeling dewy and soft. The hair removal wasn’t painful at all, mostly because the female fae moved her hand around Jane’s nude body and the hair just *disappeared*. Jane wondered what exactly they called hair removal magic, but she didn’t know how to ask without sounding ignorant. She made a mental note to ask someone else later.

When the spa attendant let her know dinner was quickly approaching and that she’d be picked up from her room, Jane got dressed and left the spa. This was the first time she’d been alone in the castle and she was pleased to find she could make her way to her borrowed room with no assistance. Once there, she saw two full racks of clothing, some of them the new items she’d selected with the queen. Jane kept on the casual dress she’d been wearing all day because she felt like she’d had it off almost as much as she’d had it on. She freshened up her makeup with the new bottles Liam had given her. She had a few minutes to look through some of the other bottles and sniff some scented oils that Jane thought might be perfume of some kind, before a knock came at the door.

Jane's heart picked up, wondering if Kiernan would be the one to pick her up for dinner. She tried not to look disappointed when Roarke was revealed. Roarke's eyes widened at the sight of Jane.

"You look different," Roarke said dumbly.

"She looks incredible!" Jane heard Seamus from behind Roarke.

"Hello, Roarke. Thank you, Seamus," Jane laughed as she greeted the men she could see. It amused Jane how they seemed to always be together.

A whistle trilled as Finn stepped forward, wiggling his brows at her.

"Are you entirely sure that we can't just run away together, beautiful?"

"Finn, you are shameless," Jane responded with a smile. She didn't mind his flirting, mostly because it felt harmless. Like maybe he didn't mean it. Or like he was stuck in his own version of fake-it-til-you-make-it, just as she had always been.

"But you love me," came his enthusiastic reply as he held out his arm for her to take.

"Hello, Jane," Daire said from the back of the group.

"Hello, Daire. Do you four always travel in a pack like this?"

"We're bestest best friends, Jane," Finn answered loudly before lowering his voice to a pretend whisper, "and they feed us here. I'm a terrible cook."

She couldn't help the loud laugh that escaped at Finn's antics.

The pack of five made it to dinner and Jane's breath caught in her throat when she saw Prince Kiernan standing across the room with his parents. The moment she was in the room, his eyes lifted as if he possessed a sixth sense that alerted him to her presence. His eyes widened as they took in her altered appearance and his lips parted slightly. His body moved,

leaning forward as if he was going to walk right over to her, but his father's hand stilled him.

Kiernan's face looked down to the hand on his arm, breaking the trance he'd seemed to be in and Jane noticed the queen watching her with an odd look on her face. Her head was tilted to the side and Jane could practically see the question marks in her eyes as they flicked from Kiernan to Jane. Jane blushed, wondering what the queen was thinking.

Roarke and the guys tugged her forward, joining the royal family as they went to the table and all took the same seats from the night before. Jane noticed Kiernan gesturing towards her seat while speaking quietly in his mother's ear. Roarke was frowning at the pair, watching the exchange. Melody shook her head in a sharp negative before looking back towards the table with a smile that rang false. What was that about?

The king cleared his throat and then spoke out to the table as a whole.

"I would like to keep Jane's Questioning off the table during dinner." The king looked at Jane with a sympathetic smile. "I've heard from more than one female that the process is just as incredibly stressful for a female as it is for any of our males. So let us just enjoy dinner and try to grant Jane a small reprieve from her worries."

There were nods and murmurs of agreement around the table and Jane breathed out a sigh she didn't realize she'd been holding in.

"I appreciate that very much, Your Majesty," Jane replied honestly. "But it hasn't all been stressful. I had fun with Melody today, trying on clothes and letting Liam teach me how to decorate my face."

The queen's smile turned sincere as Jane spoke.

"It was quite enjoyable for me, as well," she responded. "I cannot remember the last time I have been able to gossip like a young girl while selecting clothes and make-up."

"And you look beautiful," Roarke said with a kind smile.

“She’s always been beautiful,” Kiernan inserted. Roarke’s eyes bugged out a bit.

“I wasn’t saying you weren’t beautiful before, Jane. You’re just, uh, more beautiful?”

Finn started laughing at Roarke’s fumbling. Jane couldn’t stop her smile even as she shook her head and put him out of his misery.

“I knew what you meant, Roarke.”

“I wanted to ask if you’d selected a favorite juice, Jane,” Kiernan said, staring intently at Jane across the table.

“Excuse me?” Jane looked at her glass of water on the table in confusion. She wasn’t drinking juice. What an odd question. Jane shrugged as she answered. “I like orange juice if it’s not sugared up. It’s best with the pulp in it.”

“What?” Kiernan dropped his hand, which was holding a food-laden fork, back to the table. He shook his head. “None of them were orange, Jane.”

Jane looked at him from across the table like he was the biggest idiot she’d ever seen.

“Orange juice,” she said, slowing the words dramatically and causing Finn’s shoulders to shake along with Roarke’s. “It comes from oranges in the human realm.”

Kiernan gently leaned his fork on his plate and used his thumb and forefinger to pinch the bridge of his nose. He took a breath and then looked back at Jane.

“Thank you for the clarification. It’s my turn now. You had a selection of juices with your breakfast. I’d asked you to share which was your favorite so that I could tell you the name of your favorite FAE juice.”

Dammit. Jane could feel a slight reddening in her cheeks. Of course she was the idiot after hamming it up to make him look like one. She thought back to his sweet gesture, getting her a whole variety of juices to try and then she felt like a jerk.

“I’m sorry,” she said guiltily, twining her fingers in her lap. “I really liked the violet-colored one.”

“That’s your favorite, too, isn’t it, K?” Seamus asked.

“Well remembered, Seamus,” Kiernan answered while keeping his eyes on Jane. “I would have pegged you for one of the sweeter choices. Kiseo juice comes from kiseo berries and they’re known for being quite tart.”

“I thought it was delicious,” Jane responded. “Too sweet doesn’t do it for me.”

“Is that so?”

Was he still talking about juice? Was she? Kiernan’s soft response made her feel like they were the only two people in the room. How could his voice cause goosebumps to raise along her arms from across a crowded table?

Finn either didn’t notice the tension or didn’t care, because he jumped in like the table was a pool and he needed to make a giant splash in order to survive.

“It’s probably because you’re just so sweet already, Jane.” Finn didn’t speak at normal volume levels. His voice was set permanently to booming. “Sweet as sugar and twice as nice.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she heard Kiernan mutter only because she was so tuned into him.

Jane liked to think she was an overall good person, but she didn’t think anyone had ever described her as sweet. Finn was probably just trying to cut the tension.

Dinner was delicious, except for one dish. One of the things on her plate looked like meat, but had the texture of memory foam and tasted like rotten peas. She managed to swallow that bite down, but definitely didn’t go for another. It could be the fountain of youth in food form and she wouldn’t be able to eat more of it.

Jane was surprised to see her plate almost empty. Dinner was almost over. The idea that her picture and dating profile would be magically arriving on who-knows-how-many crystals around the kingdom made her feel ill with nerves. Maybe eating dinner hadn’t been the brightest idea. The bite of weird meat foam felt like a brick in her belly as she started to feel her pulse race.

When the king suggested they retire to the study for desserts and drinks again, she followed the group without speaking. She was surprised that all of the guys came along.

Weren't they nervous at all? What if they didn't answer her questions correctly? She guessed they'd all know who 'passed' and who didn't soon enough, so maybe it didn't matter when everyone found out. She looked at the other guys, wondering if anyone else was nervous, too. Or maybe they'd just done this so many times that it wasn't nerve-wracking for them like it was for her.

Roarke, obviously, was cool as a cucumber and totally relaxed knowing he would decline either way. She could practically see Finn wagging his tail in excitement with a big smile on his face, waiting for the invitation to come. It made her smile at him, which of course caused his own smile to widen in return.

Daire looked like he was about to fall asleep in his chair. She shook her head at him, but she felt like his attitude was his armor against disappointment. She should know, as she'd spent years with her own kind of armor. She kept people away by never allowing them too close. It wasn't an accident that she didn't have many friends. Even if she felt the loneliness sometimes, she always thought that better than losing any more loved ones.

Seamus was chatting with the queen. He really was the sweetest thing. She wondered if he would make it through, and if so, would he make it all the way to the final questions? It would be interesting to see his answer to the last question. 'What would be your response if I asked you to do something that you didn't want to do?' Would he stand up to her? Would he offer to do it anyway?

When she looked at Kiernan, she found him watching her survey the others. What was it about him that was constantly making her blush? If she counted every time she'd blushed in her life before meeting him, it would be less than the number of times since meeting him yesterday.

She met him *yesterday*. This was all insane.

The meat foam felt like it was expanding. She could taste it again. Gross. She hated being this nervous, but didn't know how to calm herself down. She needed a distraction.

“How many of these things have you participated in, Roarke?”

The room went silent at her question, ratcheting her nerves even higher rather than distracting her from them.

“Am I not supposed to ask?” She looked at the other faces, but they were all watching Roarke.

“Some people can get finicky about it, Jane,” he answered with a small smile. “There are negative and positive connotations with anything. A female who's had more than a few Questionings is high-maintenance or greedy. Or does she just know what she wants and hasn't found it yet? Is there something wrong with a male who hasn't gotten a single Questioning invitation? Or is he still waiting for the right female? What about the male that makes it to Questioning after Questioning and always comes up short during one of the final round questions? Most of the time, no one asks how many times someone has participated because no one ever knows whether the answer will be received as a positive or a negative.”

“I'm so sorry,” she mumbled, cheeks burning like hot coals.

“I don't mind, Jane,” he answered evenly. “It's different for you. For one, you are so new to all of this. I don't think you are poking fun at me, merely curious about how everything works here. For another, I'm hoping to be your second, your confidant. I am the exact right person to ask. How can I expect you to share personal insights with me if I am unwilling to do the same?”

“So... have you participated in many Questionings?”

“Two, Jane. Only two. They're not common in the first place, but it's also so easy to get cut. You can make the right choices or give the right answers 99 times, but it only takes

one mistake to be out of the running. I've never made it to the final rounds."

Roarke looked at the other males in the room, and apparently seeing confirmation, continues.

"There have been four Questionings since I have come of age with my friends. Kiernan's been of age for an additional three."

Roarke gestured to Daire, who nodded before speaking.

"I received the invitation all four times. I accepted three of them and only made it through the initial 10 questions once. I was cut in the final rounds."

Seamus spoke up next.

"I only received one invitation and I did match with the initial 10 questions. I was cut before the final round based on my cooking. The female requested we make a fancy dinner with multiple courses and I suppose that I wasn't able to measure up."

Seamus shrugged, trying and failing to look nonchalant when Finn cut in, sounding unusually solemn.

"I also received all four invitations. I accepted all of them and made it through the 10 questions without an issue on three. For one of the Questionings, I was cut with Seamus during the multiple-course dinner round. I've been let go twice from the final rounds. I've never been the last standing, either."

The group all looked to Kiernan, but he wasn't engaging. His parents must have taken pity on him, because the king spoke up next.

"I participated in a few back in my day, but only went through the final rounds with my beautiful queen."

"It was my only questioning," Melody said with a fond smile for Cormac. "You can't improve upon perfection."

Jane looked at Kiernan. Had he never received an invitation? Would that be humiliating like Roarke insinuated? Jane didn't think that would be embarrassing. If you didn't

match with someone, then you just didn't match. It didn't mean you were awful or anything.

What was he hiding? Why wouldn't he speak up when everyone else had? He was shifting from foot to foot in the first display of discomfort she had seen from him. She wondered if he was embarrassed at his answer.

The anticipatory silence in the room finally broke Kiernan and he shared his story through gritted teeth in a few short, sharp sentences without looking up from the floor.

"I've been invited to seven. I only accepted the first one. I went through the entire process and was selected. She moved into the castle with me and 30 days later, she moved out. I haven't wanted to participate since." He looked at Jane and she could see hurt swirling in his eyes. He was standing so stiffly. There was a massive story there and she longed to hear it. She wanted to understand this confounding male.

"Until now, I suppose," he said softly, tilting his head to the side and studying Jane. "Until you."

She jumped as the queen's crystal chimed more loudly than she'd ever heard it, sounding like a dozen ringing bells this time. She glanced over to see the queen looking at everyone else. Jane was confused until she realized it was the guys' crystals chiming, not the queen's. What? All of the men in the room pulled out their crystals. As they did so, the crystals grew from palm-sized to almost the size of a full sheet of paper. She watched as everyone looked to their crystals and looked back towards Jane before looking down to their crystals again.

Then Thomas was escorted into the room and she figured it out.

Oh, shit... the Questioning had begun.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JANE FELT LIKE all the air had left the room. Including any air that may have been in her lungs. Was she still breathing? She wasn't sure. She was glad to be sitting down, though, as she knew her legs wouldn't have kept her standing much longer. Thomas walked over and leaned close.

"You're fine, Jane," he said in a whisper, making sure no one else overheard. "You remember how this goes, right? We started by building you a profile that gave some basics about you and your image to every male in the entire realm who met your initial criteria. You wanted someone between the ages of 20 and 40 that was taller than you who enjoyed reading, had completed school, and could envision a future with kids. Those were the cornerstones required for the male to receive your invitation at all."

"Why are we whispering?" Jane whispered back. "Don't they all know how these work?"

"Sorry, Jane," Thomas said to her with a wince. "But I don't think I've ever let confidential information slip. Males aren't generally told why they do or do not move forward, so as not to influence their profiles for future Questionings."

"I understand," Jane replied, waving off his apology. "If someone was always cut because they didn't like to cook, they might suddenly grow an interest in cooking."

"Exactly. And it wouldn't be true so it would skew the results and they'd get in big trouble. Moving on. Once they received the invitation itself, they can accept or reject your invitation to move forward for any reason. For example, if the male isn't attracted to the female running the Questioning, he'll decline the invitation. Some males will reject a female because they're simply not interested in pursuing a

relationship at that time. The invitation goes to every male fitting your criteria, so this is their opportunity to opt out.”

Every male fitting her criteria. Jane’s breath began to saw in and out. She felt like she hadn’t had a moment to digest any of this. And it was a lot. No single person could handle this much in the short time she had. She saw spots in the corners of her vision and put her head in her hands.

She blinked and Roarke was kneeling in front of her, trying to catch her eye.

“You are doing well, Jane,” he said calmly, resting one hand on her shoulder. “I got your invitation and declined already, so I am officially your second as of this moment, if you will have me. Probably the fastest denial in the history of the Questioning because I did not even stop to read your profile. Breathe. I promise not to let you go through any of this alone. Keep going, Thomas. Knowing what is next will help her.”

She focused on Roarke’s kind eyes and slowly, so slowly, the room beyond Roarke and Thomas came into focus. Thomas continued, louder now, and gestured to the males still looking at their crystals.

“Once they accept your invitation, they’re given your initial 10 yes-or-no questions. They must match your answers exactly in order to move forward. They’re made aware immediately of whether or not they’ll need to arrive at the castle for the next round. Those initial 10 questions have always brought the total number of continuing participants below 50, but I have a sneaking suspicion that you’ll have more than that since you’re such a special little snowflake.”

Jane’s eyes traveled around the room. All of the males were looking at their crystals except the king. And the queen was watching Kiernan.

Kiernan was singularly focused on the crystal in his hand, his drink forgotten on the table beside him. She knew he would accept the invitation since he said he would. So he must be looking at her initial 10 questions. Would his answers match hers?

Her questions flashed in her mind and she wondered if Kiernan was agonizing over any of them. If he was worried. If he even cared at all. Jane knew she wanted him to pass. All day, his face was continually popping into her head when she thought about her tests or her final questions. She thought about what he might answer and if he'd be the one to make it through the games for her.

"Well, fuck me dead, Jane," Finn whined. The hand holding his crystal dropped into his lap while his other hand rose until the back of it rested against his forehead. He dramatically tilted his head backwards as he moaned. "The tragedy. We're not meant to be. How ever will I go on?"

Thank goodness for Finn. She couldn't help but giggle at his antics. Roarke was laughing, too, shoulders shaking in front of her with the force of his laughter. She was surprised to be joined by Seamus, as well.

"You're out, too, Seamus?" Roarke asked.

"Nope," Seamus responded with a simple smile. "I'm in."

Jane heard what sounded like a growl come from Kiernan who was still focusing on his crystal, jaw clenched. Oh, no. Was he out? What did that growl mean?

"You're in, Seamus, and I'm not?" Finn asked, pretending to be outraged. "What kind of rigged ridiculousness is this? Janie, tell me there was a glitch and your questions wouldn't select Seamus over me."

"I'm in, too," mentioned Daire before she could respond. He sounded as if he was agreeing to pick up dinner on the way home from work.

She opened her mouth to answer Finn when the whole room heard a relieved sigh, bringing all eyes over to Kiernan.

"As am I," Kiernan said. When he realized the whole room had heard him and was looking at him, he gave Jane the cutest aww-shucks smile and shrugged. His response was so different from the man she'd seen so far that Jane simply blinked in response. Kiernan let the smile fade from his face and nodded at her, leaving her even more confused. Capricious, indeed.

“WHAT?” Finn nearly shouted to the room, pulling all attention back to him. “KIERNAN, TOO?” Daire chuckled in response before clueing in Finn.

“Finn, you’re the messiest guy I know. Bet that’s what got you ruled out.”

“Say it ain’t so, Precious,” Finn agonized. “You’re one of those neat freaks? Nope.”

Finn walked over to her and patted her on the shoulder.

“Chin up,” he said with a look of deep pity on his face, “it never would have worked out between us. You’ll find someone else someday. They won’t be me, but maybe they’ll be able to cook or something to make up for it.”

“I will do my best to give other men a fair shot, Finn,” she said in her best serious voice, “but I don’t know if there will ever be room in my heart for someone else. You may have ruined me for all others.”

“Please don’t encourage him, Princess,” Kiernan said in exasperation, eliciting another little shiver along her spine. His eyes twinkled at her, betraying his otherwise stern expression. “Finn’s ego is already the size of the entire realm.”

Jane giggled in response, most of the others in the room joining in her laughter. The levity died a quick death when Thomas’ crystal chimed and he held a hand out for Jane.

“Thought you might want to know how many men are moving forward,” Thomas said.

“I’d certainly like to know,” Kiernan spoke up.

“You know you don’t get further details while you’re a participant,” the queen scolded gently. “You can go into the Informal Dining Room next door, Thomas.”

Huh. Guess they didn’t call it a Morning Room after all. She followed Thomas into the next room, Roarke following them in.

“I know you declined your invitation, Prince Roarke,” Thomas nodded respectfully to Roarke. “By your presence here, I am assuming you’re ready to officially be acting as

Jane's second and may be privy to all details moving forward?"

Jane felt all the warm fuzzies when Roarke looked to her to respond. Such a small thing and yet it made her feel so valued.

"Yes, I've selected Roarke as my second, Thomas," she replied. Thomas nodded again.

"I'll spit it out then," Thomas said seriously, "119 males are able to participate, Jane."

"Truly?" Roarke said, eyes wide in shock. "I have never seen more than 75 come to the castle for a single Questioning."

"I said it earlier, there's never been more than 50," Thomas corrected. "I warned you that this Questioning's participant numbers might reach an unprecedented high. Jane, you're lovely and it seems many of our males are interested in the one-on-one relationship you geared your 10 questions towards."

"What can we do?" Jane breathed. "That's too many, isn't it?"

"There's nothing to be done," Thomas said. "They'll arrive tomorrow, ready to participate, and we'll begin taking them through the tests. I'll be on my way to Queen Melody in a moment to finalize the first three rounds for tomorrow. She selected 15 final round questions for you, Jane, so while the entire process may take longer than normal, I know we'll find your match."

"Thank you for letting me know, Thomas," Jane responded, slightly in shock.

"Of course, Jane. Have a good evening, Prince Roarke."

Thomas nodded and left the room.

"Well it seems that you are the most popular female in the realm!" Roarke teased her.

But Jane was feeling ill. Had Thomas really said 119 males? That was a lot. Earlier today when she realized Liam

would be eliminated before even getting an invitation, she had worried about how specific she'd been. She thought the men might not want her since she didn't have wings. A small part of her had worried that she'd somehow end up with no one showing up for the next rounds at all.

But 119 men. Jane felt like her inner voice split into a million voices, all shouting how they were feeling in her head. One was screaming excitement, while she also had nervous, scared, anxious, shocked, and okay, *proud*, among others.

"I see the shock on your face, Jane," Roarke said, rubbing his hand along her upper arm briskly. "But you are in capable hands. My mother and Thomas will make sure things go smoothly so you are able to move through elimination rounds to find the right male for you. You need to take it one round at a time. I believe that is why they have rounds. To make the process less daunting, perhaps."

Roarke was right, the shock had her feeling totally detached from reality right now.

"I think I might want to go to my room now," she said. "I think I need to be alone."

"Do you know how to get there?" Roarke asked kindly.

"Yes."

"I understand. I will go back to the study and let everyone know that you are going to bed."

"Thank you, Roarke."

"Of course, Jane. I will help in any way that I can."

Jane made it back to her room minutes later and stripped down to her lace panties before hanging the outfit gently on the rack. She selected one of her new nightgowns. The spaghetti-strapped slip dress was almost indecently short, but the pale pink silk trimmed in lace made her feel beautiful and feminine. She focused on taking off her makeup and even slid on the matching satin slippers that she found underneath the clothing rack. The slippers had Tinker Bell's enormous fluff puffs in the same pale pink on the toes. Holy shit, she was wearing fairy shoes in the fairy world.

They were ridiculous.

She loved them.

Jane was tapping her toes on the floor while sitting on the side of the bed, thinking about the next day while looking at the giant pom-poms on her shoes when someone knocked on her door. She figured Roarke forgot to mention something and had come back, so she opened it without thinking about her current outfit.

Standing at her door with one arm up on the frame highlighting the muscles in his arms while also displaying the bottom half of one shimmery charcoal wing was Kiernan. He breathed in as if to say something and, mouth still open, stood stock-still while he took her in.

Jane cringed inside thinking about how she looked. Curls widening into waves as they fell out of her hair and a barely-there, lace-trimmed silk nightie. Fabulous. She looked like she'd either been entertaining a gentleman caller or was hoping to. At least she didn't still have makeup on. She felt like that somehow would have made it worse.

They stood staring for a long moment, her eyes locked on his as they roamed her entire body. When his eyes came back up to hers, she couldn't hold the stare and looked down. Her mouth fell open when she noticed the massive bulge in his pants. Holy hell. Maybe all of the fae men really were packing foot-long subs in their pants.

She forced her eyes back up to his and caught the smirk on his face. That damn smirk. He knew what she'd seen and didn't mind a bit. She guessed *someone* was proud of what he had downtown. Not that he shouldn't be proud. She was losing all focus now that a penis was making itself known. She shook her head to clear it.

"Hi, Jane," he said. That's it. Just hi. But with that Irish accent that could melt butter, she had to stop herself from literally swooning.

"Hello, Kiernan," she responded automatically, having to force her eyes up a second time from ogling his goodies.

“When Roarke said you weren’t coming back to the study, I wanted to check on you. Make sure you were okay and that you didn’t get bad news.”

“Everything’s fine,” she said, focusing on keeping her eyes above his neck. “And I don’t want to share any secrets about what Thomas told me accidentally. I’m just feeling a little overwhelmed and tired. I thought an early bedtime before tomorrow’s festivities might be good for me.”

“I see,” Kiernan murmured, leaning in through the doorway to be closer to Jane. Was he doing this on purpose? Was it getting hot in here? Nope, that was just the massive fairy in front of her, bringing the heat. “Can I come in, Jane?”

Why was he saying her name again? Did he know that his accent made her name sound like magic? Wait, what did he ask her? No, she couldn’t let him come in. She shouldn’t. She was on an adventure to meet the man of her dreams and right now, her dreams were hosting 119 men.

He was only one of the men and it wasn’t fair to whoever she might end up with for her to start catching any feels for this guy. She could think he was hot. Which she did. She could admire his strong jaw. Which she did. She could ogle his goodies. Yes, she did that, too.

But she shouldn’t be alone in her room with him. It felt too much like she’d be cheating on her husband on her wedding day, even if she had no idea who her husband might be.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Kiernan.”

“You are right. It is not a good idea. Let me in anyway.”

For all that’s holy. He’d been intense since she met him, but him turning that intensity on her while sexual tension nearly vibrated the air around them? How much strength was she expected to possess?

“I can’t,” she whispered, clenching the muscles in her legs to stop herself from swaying towards him.

“Then I’ll do it in the hallway,” he growled. “I don’t care.”

He reached down for her and pulled her body closer, making sure every inch of their bodies pressed together. Her head automatically tilted back, the significant height difference making her feel even smaller as her body melted into his.

“I know I shouldn’t,” he continued, staring into her eyes, “that this isn’t allowed, but I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. If I make one wrong move, you’ll belong to someone else.”

He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

“And you feel like mine, Jane.”

He kissed her cheek.

“I can’t risk never getting the chance to kiss you. Just once. Say yes.”

She looked into his eyes and felt her heart stumble. She didn’t know what was going to happen tomorrow either. She could end up with anyone. Especially since she was being spoon-fed these rules as she went along. If there was a way to manipulate the system, she certainly didn’t know it. But she wanted Kiernan in a way she’d never wanted anyone else. So she said the only thing she could possibly say while pressed against his hard body, surrounded by bergamot and cinnamon, his delicious scent.

“Yes.”

His lips captured hers instantly, like he’d been waiting a lifetime for her to say yes instead of a few moments. Butterflies took flight in her belly, a riotous shivering that moved throughout her body. She felt one of his hands twine into the curls in her hair, keeping her mouth where he wanted it. The other slid down to the small of her back so he could pull her even closer. She felt his hardness rub across her stomach, making her tummy do flips. Her panties grew damp.

When a small moan escaped her mouth, Kiernan took the opportunity to slide his tongue inside. Her toes curled at the rich taste of him. Kiernan tasted like sin, all dark chocolate and decadence. She stroked her tongue along his, trying to imprint the taste of him on her mind permanently.

When he groaned, her body subconsciously started to grind her pelvis harder against him needing friction, needing his touch desperately. He reached down and grabbed a handful of her ass, pulling her higher onto his body and matching up their most intimate parts.

Her legs automatically lifted and locked around his waist. His hands on her ass were keeping the back of her nightgown down until he slid them underneath to feel the lace of her panties. Another groan broke the silence. She writhed against him as he used his big hands to encourage her movement. His lips broke apart from hers so he could take in a deep, panting breath.

“Oh, God,” she moaned, grabbing onto the sides of his face to try and pull his lips back to hers. Her strength was no match for his and when she felt resistance, she opened her eyes in confusion.

His cheeks were slightly pink and he was breathing hard, staring at her like he wanted to throw her onto her bed, but equally as though she hung the moon. No one had ever looked at her like that.

“We have to stop,” he rumbled, “before I don’t have the strength to.”

He rested his forehead against hers and breathed deeply, purposefully. She stared at him silently, unsure of what to say.

“That was the best kiss of my life, Jane. I wish... well, I hope I make it through all of these rounds. I want to be the one to make it through your Questioning.”

She didn’t know what to say. She wanted him to be the one to make it through, too. She wanted him to be the only one at the end. But what if he wasn’t? It seemed crueler somehow to say it when it might not be him and she’d be with someone else while he walked away alone.

He kissed her lips, then kissed her forehead.

“Good night, Jane.”

He left her standing silently in her nightgown at her door, staring at an empty hallway hoping he’d come back.

Hoping he might be the one.

And worrying that he wouldn't be.

CHAPTER NINE

“GOOD MOR— OH, Jane, you look absolutely dreadful,” Thomas said in greeting the next morning.

“Wow. Thanks, Thomas, you know just what to say to a girl.” He wasn’t wrong, though. Jane was struggling and she knew she looked like roadkill. She could feel the puffiness of her face and had no doubt that her curls looked more like a rat’s nest than the pretty curls from last night. She’d barely slept, kept up late with worries about what today would bring. Who might get cut. Who might make it through.

Thomas chuckled at her, bright grin not fading in the least.

“I’m honest, Darling. And you honestly look dreadful. But don’t worry, Liam is on his way and will help you sparkle.”

They were in the study again. It seemed like Jane was spending a lot of time here. She could smell the incredible breakfast wafting from the Informal Dining Room next door and it was making Jane even grumpier.

“I wanted to go over the next steps for you,” Thomas said, pacing around in front of her, pink wings flicking as if agitated. “With this many males, we’re going to run multiple scenarios simultaneously. You only know three of the males participating, so as long as you’re able to watch their rounds, are you comfortable with us moving through the rest?”

“I don’t know, Thomas,” Jane said, irritated and hangry. “I’m hungry and I don’t understand what you’re even saying.”

Thomas looked at Jane with a critical eye, then eyed his crystal. He breathed out a sigh of relief and held up one finger at her in the universal “wait a moment” gesture. Then Liam came in the room with a few others carrying a variety of things

she promptly ignored once her eyes caught on a tray heaping with different foods.

“BREAKFAST!” Jane cheered, jumping up to hug the guard with the food, who looked incredibly uncomfortable at her response. He stood stiffly and allowed the hug, but set the tray down on a table and exited with the others rather quickly. Thomas was chuckling at the interaction.

Jane walked over to the tray to check out the spread. There were a few plates that all held different things. Some new things she hadn’t seen but also a few of the foods she’d really enjoyed so far. There was also a single glass, filled with an effervescent violet liquid, with a small notecard tucked against it. Jane picked it up and read the tidy scrawl on the card.

“I won’t see you before the Questioning, but wanted to let you know that I was thinking of you. This is sparkling kiseo juice, a fizzy version of the juice you enjoyed. Wish me luck, Beautiful Jane.”

Jane sat down so that she didn’t honest-to-God swoon and require a fainting couch. Kiernan was running less hot-and-cold and more hot-and-romantic.

Jane was so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t notice Thomas stretching to try and read the note himself.

“What’s it say, Jane? Will you show us?”

Jane tugged the note close to her chest dramatically, shielding it from Liam and Thomas.

“I don’t think she wants me to see, baby brother,” Liam said in amusement. “Don’t think she wants you to look, either, Nosy.”

Thomas sent her a sheepish grin.

“Sorry, Jane,” he apologized without looking the least bit sorry. “My mother said my curiosity would get the best of me one day. It’s not today, is it? You forgive me?”

“I forgive you, goof,” Jane chuckled as she rolled her eyes at his antics, keeping the note tucked close with one hand while she grinned teasingly at Thomas.

“Thank you, Darling,” Thomas said sincerely. He waited a single beat before speaking again. “So what is it? Who’s it from?”

Jane laughed. She imagined this was what it was like having a little brother of her own. Liam snorted as he set up a bunch of products and makeup. She wondered why any of that was necessary.

“Yes, okay? But I’m not showing it to you on principle alone now. Anyway, why am I being made up? No one is watching me today, right? I’m doing the watching.”

Thomas gave her a disappointed huff at her non answer, but used his hands to indicate backing up.

“119 males will arrive for the next round,” Thomas said.

“She’ll have more than 50 males participating?” Liam questioned incredulously as she finished the breakfast in front of her and savoring the delicious sparkling kiseo juice.

“Indeed. And here’s where we’re adjusting to handle the unusually high number of participants,” Thomas continued. “Where we normally progress through the rounds with the male stuck waiting their turn so the female is able to see every round, we’ll be running your second and third rounds simultaneously, eliminating males from each round as it occurs. This will be the first year that some males may be eliminated from round three without having participated in round two. You won’t be able to see every male during every round, but we can make sure you’re able to see Daire, Seamus, and Kiernan, as long as you’re agreeable to the plan.”

“That’s fine with me,” Jane nodded. “I don’t even know 116 of the males that will show up today.”

“That’s what I was thinking, as well.”

“But you didn’t explain why I need to look nice.”

“Every Questioning, they capture a few images of the female throughout the experience so that anyone watching feels more a part of it all,” Liam inserted. “We figured you’d want to look your best.” Thomas nodded his agreement before continuing.

“We’ll have you set up in a room just off the ballroom, we call it the mirroring room, with the rest of my team that watches the scenarios and decides what to share with the general population. I’ll make them aware to alert you when any of your three friends enter a scenario so that you can watch. Any questions?”

“Um, I don’t think so?”

“I’m off to make sure everything is set up. The males were all notified that the first round was scheduled to start at 11AM. They were required to be here no later than 9AM, though, and were told it was to handle the larger-than-usual number of participants. Coincidentally, there truly will be a larger than usual number of participants, so it’s worked out rather beautifully.”

“Okay, well, what’s the real reason they need to be here two hours early?”

“This year, Round One will be occurring as they each arrive and check in. They just don’t know it, Darling.”

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Thomas left Liam to prep Jane for the day ahead. Jane was happy for the primping on a few levels. First, she really had slept terribly last night and anyone who saw her could certainly tell. Second, she wanted to look pretty in any pictures they took. No matter what they called them here, she’d keep calling them photos because it made sense to her. Third, every woman felt more confident and ready to tackle the day’s challenges when she liked the way she looked.

With Liam’s help she looked like a damn knockout, Jane thought as he turned her to a large crystal he was using as a mirror. Liam had pulled sections of her hair back from her face and braided them together along the back, giving her a natural-looking half-up, half-down style while leaving a few curls to frame her face. Her lips were a pretty berry color and it almost looked like she wasn’t wearing eyeshadow at all. The light shimmer was almost nude, but still made her eyes sparkle.

“I really just want to put you in my pocket and have you for emergencies, Liam,” she said gratefully.

“That’s pretty much what I’m here for during your Questioning,” he chuckled, “but you’re on your own after that. I like the outfit you chose, but you took the wrong shoes.”

Jane looked down at her outfit, her lips turning down in a frown at the idea that she’d have to change shoes. She’d chosen a gauzy, emerald-green dress for the day with a full circle skirt that went just past mid-thigh. It had a high neck and long sleeves even though it had the same bare back as all of the fae clothing. She loved the dress.

She clicked her heels together the same way that Dorothy did in the Wizard of Oz while attempting to go home and pouted in Liam’s direction. She watched the pale pink fluff puffs on the slippers wiggle as she tapped her feet around.

“Say it ain’t so, Liam,” she pretended to whimper. “I don’t want to change out of my Tink shoes.”

“Your what?” Liam asked before shaking his head and crossing his arms in an X over his chest. “Doesn’t matter. No, Jane. You can’t wear bedroom slippers today when people know I helped you get ready. I won’t have people thinking I chose those to go with your elegant dress.”

“But I love them and they make me happy. And who will even see the shoes?”

Liam rolled his eyes and fiddled on his crystal for a moment.

“Roarke will meet us at the mirroring room,” he said. “Let’s go!”

He started walking out of the study.

“So do I get to keep the Tink shoes?” She muttered the question while trailing behind him. He shook his head as they walked through the halls, not answering her question.

When they arrived in the ballroom, Jane stopped still, eyes widening as she took in the massive space. She’d expected ornate, elegant, and beautiful. Instead, she would have sworn

she was standing in an enormous warehouse. The only clue that it wasn't a warehouse was that the place was squeaky clean. It must have been four stories tall, though it was all open space, and the floor had to be at least the size of a football field.

"Come on," Liam ordered, walking across the large space at a fast clip. "We don't want to get caught in it when the walls start going up."

"When the walls start going up...?"

"Yes," Liam answered without pausing his stride until he made it to the door of another room. "You don't think the castle ballroom always looks like this, do you?"

"I have no idea," Jane answered, shaking her head in wonder. She felt like some of this should be easier for her to swallow, but the reality was that she'd only been in the fae realm for a few days. "I think it'll take me a few more days to get used to the idea of magic as a way of life."

Liam walked past Roarke, who was looking at Jane in sympathy.

"No one expects you to be used to our realm yet, Jane," Roarke said. "Well, no one with a brain, at the very least." He shot Liam a glare that caused Liam to flinch.

"Sorry, Jane," Liam said apologetically. "You're handling all of this so well that it doesn't click you've only been here *days*."

"I'd be on the floor in the corner, rocking back and forth, if everything I thought was true and real suddenly had to expand to make room for all of.. this," Thomas said as he waved around the space, having bustled in with his massive presence. He made her feel like she was doing better than the average person would be. She wasn't falling to pieces, she was handling her shit.

Thomas nodded as he looked her over, until he got to her shoes. When he saw the pink slippers with the pom poms, he reared back with a grimace.

"Liam, what? Why? Did you choose...."

“I didn’t pick the damn shoes, Tommy,” Liam inserted with a huff. He pointed at Jane with an accusing finger. “She came that way.”

“A guard said you requested he dropped these off here,” Roarke mentioned, holding up slippers that were similar to Jane’s, except they were an iridescent silver and didn’t have the fluffy balls at the toes.

Thomas nodded approvingly and Liam grabbed them, bringing them over to Jane.

“Swap,” he demanded, holding out a hand for the slippers currently on her feet.

“Dammit,” Jane grumbled, making the switch and handing her Tinker Bell slippers off to Liam. “Don’t lose these, Liam. They’re my favorite thing in this whole realm.”

“A pair of slippers?” Roarke questioned, in a mock-insulted voice. “That’s your favorite thing in the realm while I’m an option?”

Jane couldn’t help but laugh at his antics, which was definitely his goal, because he smiled to see her relaxing a bit.

“There we are, Jane,” he said with a nod. “We will find the fun along the way, yes? Together. And I will make sure that whichever lucky male takes you home from The Questioning knows you need the fluffy-ball-slipper-shoes here.”

“Take a peek outside the door, Jane,” Thomas suggested, pointing towards the door they’d used to enter this small room. “See the magic of our realm.”

Jane walked to the door and glanced out, an immediate feeling of dizziness crowding her thoughts.

It reminded Jane of an architectural 3-D rendering video. The kind she saw on HGTV when an interior designer described the changes they’d make to the homeowner’s space and viewers saw a computerized image begin adjusting to fit the new vision. Except it was happening in front of her eyes in real time.

The ballroom was somehow being magically reconfigured, but there were no hammers, no nails, no construction team swaggering around with their sexy tool belts.

Walls grew up from the floor out of nowhere, closing in sections of the ballroom, making the space smaller. The walls changed colors. Doors bloomed out of the walls. The floor's texture changed in different places. Jane watched the ballroom grow smaller and smaller with each new addition until she was looking down a standard hallway and there was no ballroom to be seen.

Was the ballroom doing it on its own? Was it like.. sentient?

“How is this happening?” She would have sat down right on the ground if Roarke hadn't helped guide her to a chair. She looked up at him dumbly, but it was Thomas that answered.

“The Questioning employs a few talented manipulators to adjust the ballroom for our needs.”

“Roarke,” she said slowly, “I think I'm ready to head to that corner now so I can rock back and forth.”

He smiled gently at her.

“No, I do not think you are,” he said softly. “You are too strong for that. Take a deep breath and tell yourself ‘there is magic in this world and it is beautiful’ three times.”

He waited as she followed his instruction. She actually felt better, if a little silly. Maybe that was the point.

“There she is,” he said. “There's my friend Jane. Looking determined again, ready to find herself a mate. Soulmate, roommate... either one, but a mate nonetheless.”

She nodded at him. She looked around and noticed Liam had left. Thomas was talking to a group of males along the opposite wall, but broke apart when he saw her paying attention.

“This is my crew,” he said, introducing each of the fae males in the room. She immediately forgot their names. “And I've asked they alert you when Prince Kiernan, Seamus, or

Daire comes into view. This chair here is for you and this one's for Prince Roarke if he wants to sit."

Jane and Roarke took the indicated chairs.

"Is this shown to others live?" Jane didn't know how she felt about a live broadcast of her journey to finding a man. It seemed absurd.

"It's not live, but it's close. The mirror ends up running a few hours behind. We don't show every little thing because we don't want to completely give away the tests themselves in case they're used in future years. But enough is shown to prove we're following the spirit of The Questioning."

"Okay. What happens now?" Jane didn't know what to expect. Thomas answered.

"The males have already begun to line up outside. We're ready to begin if you are. You can see here," he said gesturing to the wall where it looked like twenty televisions were mounted, but must have been crystals set to mirror the rooms, "where we have ten rooms set up. The males will be guided to check in, just like every year."

Jane looked at Roarke and then back at Thomas.

"I still feel like I don't really know what to expect," Jane said.

"Let's just show you how it works, instead," Thomas said before talking into a small crystal in his hand. "Start bringing them in for check-in."

"Watch this mirror, here," Thomas said, tapping on a little corner of the crystal, making it expand to the size of a large painting, allowing the details in the image to sharpen into focus. "You can only hear the mirror that you've enlarged."

She watched as Kiernan entered the room through a door across from the desk. He looked mouthwatering with his blond hair pulled back and tied behind his neck with a leather string. His charcoal wings glittered in the image, standing out against the bright white clothing he'd selected. He looked relaxed and wandered to the desk. He glanced at the stool there, but remained on his feet instead of sitting.

“Name, please?” An older man was sitting behind the desk, looking bored as he shuffled through papers and not looking up at the arrival.

“Prince Kiernan Samhradh.”

The old man looked up quickly before standing and bowing respectfully at the waist.

“My deepest apologies, Prince Kiernan,” the old man fretted, “I didn’t know it was you or I would have stood immediately.”

Kiernan waved him quiet with a small smile, though, shaking his head.

“I understand you are quite busy today and no harm was done. I would like to check in, please.”

The old man’s face had grown pale as Kiernan spoke and after looking through some papers, Jane could see sweat dripping down the old man’s face. He started shaking his head. Jane’s nerves caused her to start to fidget. Was something wrong already?

“I’m sorry, Prince Kiernan, but you’re not listed for this Questioning.”

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## CHAPTER TEN

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JANE FELT HER heart drop to the bottom of her stomach. No! There'd been a mistake? She didn't want to go through this if Kiernan didn't have a chance, if *they* didn't have a chance... If there was no chance that Kiernan would be the one waiting for her at the end of it all, she wasn't sure she could do this.

Jane thought she'd managed her expectations. That after only a few days, she wasn't obsessed with Kiernan to the point that no other male would do. Apparently she'd been lying to herself the whole time. She wanted it to be Kiernan.

She looked back at the mirror and watched helplessly as Kiernan growled to the old man instructing him to check again.

The old man looked at his papers and then back to the prince. He looked nervous, but managed to pull a sheet of paper out and clear his throat.

"Prince Kiernan, these are the initial 10 questions, along with Jane's answers."

Then the man started reading through the questions.

"Do you require an open relationship to meet your needs? And Jane answered no, did you?"

"That's correct," Kiernan answered.

"Do you have any unresolved romantic feelings towards anyone? Jane said no again."

"As did I," Kiernan answered with a frustrated sigh.

They were going to go question by question to see if Kiernan had answered correctly, it seemed. Wasn't this all



done originally by magic? How was there a glitch in the system when it was magic?

Jane listened as the old man read through the next seven questions, all of which were supposed to have a “yes” answer. Kiernan agreed that his own answer had been yes each time. Then the man read off a final question.

“Final question. Do you prefer multiple partners to enhance the sexual experience? Jane said yes. Did you?”

Wait, WHAT. Jane hadn’t said yes! Jane looked at Roarke, mouth flopping open then shut before flopping open again. Roarke looked at her with a question in his eyes. Before he could ask it, Kiernan spoke.

“Jane said yes? To a preference for multiple sexual partners? Are you quite certain?”

The old man looked at the paper in his hand and back up at Kiernan.

“Quite certain. Did you say yes, as well, Prince Kiernan?”

Jane watched as Kiernan’s shoulders drooped. He ran a hand over his forehead and seemed to deflate before her very eyes.

“No,” Kiernan answered softly, sadly. “I answered no. And I’m surprised to hear that Jane said yes. I guess I’m not supposed to be here after all.”

Jane watched dumbfounded as Kiernan turned back to the door, ready to leave.

The old man smiled, looking calm for the first time since he looked up into Kiernan’s eyes.

“Oh, no, Prince Kiernan,” he said. “You’ll need to exit through the door on my left, please. You’ve passed round one.”

“I’ve... what?”

“Round one, Prince Kiernan. Jane chose *honesty* as the most important trait of all. Anyone that tells the truth about their answers, knowing they will be eliminated and lose their

chance to move on while also believing they wouldn't get caught... those males pass and move on. As you did. Please use the door to the left."

Jane felt like she could breathe again. That could have been really bad. Thank goodness this was all a test and not a massive error that let through only the males interested in multiple partners. Jane wanted to giggle at the expression on Kiernan's face, though. Instead of his brooding intensity, he looked dumbstruck. Like you could push him over with a feather.

Roarke was watching Kiernan too, but he wasn't laughing. Roarke looked... thoughtful. He turned to Jane and gave her the same look.

"My brother pulled away from The Questioning after his first experience. I've never seen him like this around any female, though, including the one who had selected him. He looked crushed for a moment in there, Jane, thinking he wouldn't get a chance. And you like him too, don't you?"

Jane swallowed roughly. What did she say? How did she respond? It didn't seem fair to favor one male over the other when Questionings weren't set up to give preference in any way. Then Jane thought about how the men were currently being tested on honesty and knew she needed to be honest, too.

"Yes, I do like him," she said quietly to Roarke, only loud enough for his ears. "But I don't think it matters."

"You're right," he answered with a nod. "In some ways, it doesn't matter. It won't help Kiernan make it through the rounds. But it would matter very much to me if the female holding my heart in her hands was also interested in me in return. Questioning or no Questioning, it would matter to me. And I know it would matter to him. I'm glad he isn't alone in his feelings."

Roarke turned his attention back to the Questioning and Jane watched as man after man was brought into a room and put through the exact same scenario as Kiernan. She watched

some pass with honesty and others fail by agreeing with the incorrect answer and claiming it as their own.

Jane couldn't believe her eyes while watching some of the eliminated participants. There was one guy, a leaner guy with a swimmer's build, scruffy brown hair and bright blue eyes that absolutely lost his shit. The guy lied smoothly and when the moderator told him he'd failed the round, he yelled about how unfair it all was. Jane thought he was going to pull some of that shaggy brown hair right out of his head. Another one of the guys broke down crying. It was almost disturbing, but also kind of sad. By the end, it seemed like the number of those who passed was about even with those who failed.

She was also able to watch Seamus and Daire, specifically. When Seamus was asked the final question, he answered like his normal, sweet self, with no hesitation about being honest.

"That clears things up," he had said with a nod. "I don't believe multiple partners would enhance my sexual experience. If Jane said yes to that, then I shouldn't have been instructed to arrive here. I apologize for wasting anyone's time."

Then he was up, trying to leave. The moderator barely had time to tell Seamus he'd passed before he'd left the room entirely.

Daire was honest, as well.

"I put 'no' on that one," he'd shrugged. "But I was surprised to be a match for Jane in the first place."

Daire sat there a moment with a frown before seeming to shrug it off and standing. The moderator let him know he'd passed at that point and Daire had exited through the passing door.

No one else came in the room. Were they done already?

"What sounds good for lunch?" Roarke asked.

"It's time for lunch?"

With 10 moderators in 10 rooms all going at the same time, round one went more quickly than Jane anticipated,

especially considering the moderator read all 10 questions to each participant. Jane was pretty sure she'd remember all 10 of her own questions for the rest of eternity, hearing them said so many times. And yet the time went by so quickly, too.

Jane wondered what it would be like if she knew more of the participants. She tried to think about how she'd feel if she had friends or even crushes going through this and seeing them get eliminated, especially for something like lying. With how she felt about liars, Jane thought it would be the end of the friendship if a guy was eliminated for lying.

But it would be strange to see people she knew competing for a chance to be with her and watching them pass or fail. How did female fae do it? And some of them did it more than once. Jane shook her head in wonder as she followed Roarke to lunch.

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“Will the participants join us for lunch?” Jane wanted to know more about how things worked around here. She picked at her salad-looking meal and happily found it was incredibly similar to a salad in taste as well as looks. The texture wasn't quite there, though, and felt more like salad-flavored-bread in her mouth. She somehow didn't mind the difference.

“No, participants are kept separate from everyone else until they're eliminated. It's always been that way. There's even a wing of the castle that's adjusted for their use if needed. Sometimes the Questionings run overnight, depending on what the rounds consist of.”

“Wow. There's so much to this whole thing.”

“It's our way of life. It's the only way we can find love. And it's grown throughout the years to make it as comfortable as possible for everyone participating. The Questioning isn't easy for anyone.

“I can see that now. The more I'm involved and the more I see of this... it's not easy at all.”

They both ate quietly, lost in their own thoughts, until Thomas spoke up from behind them.

“I’m not sure whether this is a good or bad thing, but there are now 52 males still participating in The Questioning for Jane.”

“But, that’s less than half of who started,” Roarke said, stupefied. “That many of the males were dishonest?”

“That’s why I don’t know whether it’s good or bad. It’s for the best that anyone dishonest isn’t staying when our amazing Jane here is the female in question, but it’s sad for our population that so many have been disqualified for lying.”

Jane didn’t know whether to be surprised. With so few females, and so few chances, she could kind of see why the men might lie about a simple thing like that. Especially if it wasn’t terribly important to them either way. But a lie was a lie. And Jane couldn’t abide a liar.

“What’s next, Thomas? What does round two have in store for us?”

“Rounds two and three will continue as scheduled and run simultaneously since we still have over 50 participants. You’ll actually need to start making your way back to the recon room if you’re finished with lunch.”

“The recon room? You mean the mirroring room?” Jane asked.

“Meh,” Thomas shrugged in return. “Heard one of the guys call it that. Cute, right?”

Roarke looked at Jane and saw her near-empty plate. He tilted his head toward the door while he raised his eyebrows in a wordless question, asking if she was done without speaking a word aloud. She nodded in reply, seeing his plate empty already. Sheesh, he may as well have licked the plate as it was sparkling clean.

They made their way back to the room with all the ‘screens’ and settled back into their places, ready to see what came next.

“Do you need anything, Jane?” Roarke asked solicitously.

“I don’t think a prince should be seeing to my needs, Roarke.”

“Right now, I’m just a regular male serving as your friend and your second. I want to make sure you’re okay.”

What an awesome guy. If Jane wasn’t so caught up in his brother, Jane would have wished for someone like Roarke to participate. As it was, she was glad not to have brothers battling it out for her. Roarke felt more like a sibling than a lover, though. She was lucky to have him here, but hoped he’d have his chance at love soon. Someone as amazing as Roarke deserved it.

“I’m fine, Roarke, but thank you for asking.”

They saw movement in one of the images before multiple screens started coming to life. About half of them showed a near-empty room that held 11 chairs with a box on the seat of each one— but one of them was facing the other ten. She watched as 10 men walked towards the longer row of seats, grabbing the boxes, looking inside, and then sitting down with the box now in their lap.

The other half of the mirrors showed what looked like an obstacle course. Interesting. She didn’t know how this would translate from the remaining traits she’d chosen, Communication and Loyalty.

Jane wasn’t sure where to look, so went to ask one of the men working there. She almost ran right into him as he turned to get her attention at the same time. He smiled at her and told her Prince Kiernan was one of the first again, and indicated which mirror she should watch.

He walked into one of the rooms with all the chairs and boxes. When he walked in, he stopped short, looking around the room. The same old man who’d moderated his check-in earlier came into the room and addressed him.

“Prince Kiernan, this is round two and it’s meant to address your communication skills. You’ll have one hour to complete this task. What you need to do is simple. You’ll go to the single open chair and look in the box, keeping your object

inside the box at all times without showing the others. The object inside will match what's inside one of the boxes across from you. You will have 10 opportunities to eliminate all but one of the other objects. You may do this by asking questions, making statements, or some combination of the two, whichever method you prefer in order to eliminate objects. When you've narrowed it down, the final box will be opened. If you have a match, you move on. Your time in this Questioning is at an end if the ending objects does not match. You will have an hour to complete this task. Any questions before you begin?"

"Yes," he said carefully, brow furrowed in thought. "I'm assuming I can't look in the other boxes myself?"

"No," the old moderator smiled, "you may not look in the other boxes."

"What happens if my question or statement is unclear?"

"I don't understand."

"What if the question is too subjective and they aren't sure of their answer?"

"That's a risk you take with this round. I'd be careful with your words to ensure you don't eliminate the mate to your object."

"Can I take a question or statement back once spoken?"

"No, you may not. Please speak carefully and make it clear who needs to leave."

"What if I ask all ten questions and there's more than one box at the end?"

"We'll allow you to choose your final box at that point with no further questions."

"I can't think of anything else to ask you."

"Then I'll take my own leave. Best of luck to you, Prince Kiernan."

Then the moderator went to the corner of the room.

Kiernan took a deep breath and walked to his box, picking it up and taking a look inside. Jane couldn't see what was inside. How frustrating.

Kiernan took a seat with the box in his lap, lid open so that he could look at the object. He took almost a full minute to think before finally speaking to the others in the room, none of whom had moved an inch since Kiernan arrived.

“If your object has a face, please stay.”

Jane watched two people stand and leave the room. Eight stayed. Kiernan nodded and looked at his object again.

“If your object is male, please stay.”

Only one got up and left this time. Seven remained.

“If the face on your object is smiling, please leave the room.”

Two more left the room, leaving five. Kiernan studied his object intently and seemed to hesitate before speaking again. Jane crossed her fingers.

“If the face on your object is sad, please stay.”

No one left. Kiernan looked frustrated.

“If you can see the color of the eyes on the face of your object, please leave.”

Another person stood and exited. Four more in the room. Kiernan needed to correctly eliminate three of those four to leave his match. Jane thought about what Kiernan must be looking at. Clearly, a sad male face with his eyes closed. If it was only a face, he'd have to really speak to the details in order to narrow it further. He was halfway through his ten questions, too.

Kiernan studied his object, turning it in the box this way and that. He opened his mouth only to shut it once before looking to the object again. Kiernan's eyes suddenly focused on a specific point in the box.

“If your face shows only a single teardrop, please stay.”

Someone else stood and left the room. Kiernan just needed one more person to leave and for the person who was left to have his matching object. Kiernan started turning the object in his box again. He looked at the two remaining people in the room with a small, triumphant smile.

“If your face has a small brown mole between the nose and mouth, please stay.”

One of the two remaining people stood and left. Kiernan sucked in a breath and stood just as the moderator walked back into the center of the room.

“Let’s see if the objects match,” he said. “Prince Kiernan, please remove the object from your box.”

Kiernan did, and the object was pretty much exactly what Jane thought it would be. It looked almost like a mask because it was just a face. A sad man with his eyes closed, a single tear running down one cheek. She couldn’t see the mole, but assumed it was there.

The moderator walked over to the other box and opened it, pulling out the object inside. Jane held her breath, hoping it would be the matching object. When the moderator brought it over to Kiernan, she felt air rush back into her lungs.

It was a perfect match.

Kiernan had passed round two. Jane crossed her fingers, hoping he could keep it up. The odds seemed better and worse each time. On the one hand, he had less competition each round that he passed.

On the other hand, would the next round be the one he couldn’t pass? Jane nervously bit her lower lip. He only had to slip up once and he was out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JANE'S ATTENTION HAD been so focused on Kiernan that she barely noticed the other mirrors in the room. She'd been told that Daire was beginning round three, but she wasn't willing to miss Kiernan's round two.

But now that Kiernan had completed his round she was curious about what was happening in the obstacle courses she could see. She was surprised to see so many different men running the obstacle course for each mirror. She counted ten men lined up at the start in one of the mirrors. She didn't think there were enough participants remaining to fully populate the obstacle courses showing in each mirror. Hadn't Thomas said there were only 52 participants left and that they'd be split up between round two and round three?

And if Kiernan's round had been communication, how was running an obstacle course going to show loyalty?

Jane turned to Roarke with a question in her eyes.

"Why are they running an obstacle course?"

"I don't know," Roarke said, "What was your last trait? Did you say attractive or muscular or something?"

"Absolutely not! I said loyalty."

"Are you sure my mother understood what you said? Because it truly looks more like their physical fitness is being tested."

"I mean, I thought she understood."

One of the men tapped her to let her know that Kiernan was about to begin round three if she wanted to watch. Already? Jane was surprised he went straight from one thing to another. When she nodded eagerly, he enlarged one of the mirrors.

“Look, he’s going with Seamus and Daire,” Jane pointed out to Roarke.

“No, he isn’t,” Roarke said, pointing to another mirror on the wall. “Remember? We were told Daire was starting round three already and I can see Daire there.”

Jane looked at the mirror Roarke was indicating before looking back at the enlarged mirror. How could Daire be participating in two different obstacle courses?

“You absolute sneak, Mother!” Roarke said under his breath with a muted chuckle.

“What? What’s going on? Why do we see Daire twice?”

“Just watch my brother’s course. I’ll explain once I figure out the catch.”

So Jane watched as the older male moderator that’d been in Kiernan’s room each time walked to the starting line and addressed the group.

“This is a test of physical fitness with simple rules. You must be one of the first five to complete the obstacle course in order to move on. You may begin at the spark.”

When all ten men had adjusted and were looking again at the moderator, he shot a spark out of a single fingertip signaling them to start. The ten men shot off the starting line, three of them, including Seamus, already pulling ahead of Kiernan.

She watched the frustrated look cross Kiernan’s face as he pushed harder to keep up with the three men ahead of him. Kiernan made it to the first obstacle, rushing up a flight of stairs to a 25-foot pole set up like a balance beam he’d have to get across.

“But there’s no net. He’s got to be two stories off the ground. What if he falls?”

Jane turned worried eyes to Roarke, who had his chin down towards his chest and his eyebrows raised to the sky, looking at her like she had half a brain.

“He has wings, Jane,” he said slowly as Jane watched Kiernan start across the pole at a fast clip.

“Then why doesn’t he fly across?”

“It’s quicker for him to run, if he can keep his balance. But if he falls, his wings will catch him. No need for a net.”

Kiernan didn’t fall, but he didn’t catch up to the men who had already passed him either. He kept on running, making it to the second obstacle quickly, which was a wall with a giant arrow pointing down to a muddy pit. Kiernan didn’t hesitate. He dropped down and started to army crawl in the wet mud underneath the wall to the other side. It was a long, low crawl and when he made it through, he was filthy, coated in mud from his toes up to his wings. He shook out his arms, attempted to brush some of the mud from his face and continued on to the third obstacle.

He was coming up to another wall, but this one had an arrow pointing up and a few knotted ropes were dangling down the side. Kiernan paused to look at the ropes and Daire raced past, leaving Kiernan in fifth place.

Daire and Kiernan both grabbed onto the ropes and started to haul themselves up.

“Well, why aren’t they flying now? That has to be quicker than climbing up a rope.”

“It would be quicker, but their wings are covered in mud. They’re not usable like that. Mother designed this on purpose so they’d have to use brute strength to get over the wall. Like I said, she’s a sneaky mastermind.”

Kiernan had just made it to the top of the wall when Daire called out his name.

“Kiernan, wait, my arms are done. Can you help me up?”

Kiernan’s whole body froze momentarily and she could practically see his mind calculating his chances of moving on if he stopped and helped versus if he went on. He knew he was in fourth place. He didn’t know how many more obstacles were in the course. Did he want to risk his ranking right now? Jane held her breath as it all clicked in her mind.

This was the test. That wasn't Daire. Were any of the other guys even real? Was the whole thing set up deliberately to put him in fourth place, a risky spot, and then have a friend right there that he'd have to choose to either help or not.

Kiernan stopped and dropped down to his belly over the edge of the wall, reaching down one hand to help Daire. He pulled Daire up to the top of the wall and shot back up, ready to continue on. He didn't even notice Daire fade into nothing. She was right! It wasn't Daire at all.

He jumped down on the other side and pulled up short when he saw the moderator standing right in front of him, one arm extended to stop him in his tracks.

"Congratulations on passing round three, Prince Kiernan," he said.

"I didn't finish the course," he said, slightly confused and huffing as he tried to catch his breath. Then he seemed to catch on. "But that doesn't matter because this wasn't testing physical fitness."

"You are correct. If you cannot be loyal to a friend, how can you be loyal to a future mate? Stopping to help your friend at the risk of your continuation in the Questioning proves the kind of loyalty needed to pass this round."

"And that wasn't Daire, I suppose?"

The moderator smiled.

"It was not. That was a moderator, glamoured to look like one of your close friends that could have participated in this Questioning."

"And the others on the course? Seamus?"

"No one else was on the course, Prince Kiernan. The other eight were figments. You were the only one being tested on this course."

Kiernan nodded.

"Please continue to your appointed room for The Questioning, Prince Kiernan. Dinner will be brought to you directly after you have ordered using the crystal in your room.

The Questioning will continue tomorrow. Congratulations again on passing round three.”

Roarke started laughing, startling Jane.

“What’s so funny?”

“You have to know how glamours work, Jane,” Roarke answered, still laughing through his explanation. “Glamour is a unique kind of magic that can change what people see, but the moderators don’t choose who ‘shows up’ for Kiernan. The glamour is set for Kiernan himself to fill in the gaps. It wouldn’t work otherwise. It couldn’t be just any friend in case the participant knew whomever hadn’t been invited to the Questioning. It had to be someone the contestant would believe to be in the games for the test to work. So Kiernan is the one who chose to see Daire. I would have thought Seamus would be his choice for sure, but then it hit me. It makes sense that my reserved brother would choose my grumpiest friend as a favorite. I just envisioned them sitting in a room, glaring at each other. It was funny.”

Jane looked at the mirrors, wondering about Seamus and Daire. The mirror where Roarke had seen Daire was dark, so Jane assumed he was done, but didn’t know whether or not he had passed.

“I want to know about Seamus and Daire, Roarke,” she said. “Did they pass? Could we watch theirs?”

Jane’s eye caught on another mirror where a man was paused on top of the wall in the obstacle course. She saw him look over the edge and shake his head. She felt bad when he jumped down the far side, continuing his course, only to be stopped by a moderator. He’d failed.

Roarke must have used his crystal to reach Thomas, because he was fiddling with it when he spoke next.

“Thomas said Seamus passed both rounds. Daire has passed the obstacle course, but is only just now heading to his second round. We should be able to watch that one if you want.”

“Yeah, I want to.”

The tech in the room overheard them talking or got new orders from Thomas because he adjusted the mirrors and enlarged a different one. The ten people with boxes were sitting there and they watched Daire enter the room.

“Will Daire have the same object as Kiernan?”

“Yes,” Roarke answered. “It’s the only way to keep it fair. And the participants aren’t allowed to interact at all during the process, so there’s no reason to switch it up.”

The rules were explained to Daire, just as they had been to Kiernan, and he took a few minutes to look over the object in his box before he spoke for the first time.

“Please stay if you have a mask in your box.”

One person got up and left. Daire’s lips squished to one side of his face as he concentrated on his box.

“If the face is fae or human, please stay.”

Three people left the room that time. Six more to go. Jane wondered if this test was too easy.

“Please stay if the eyes are fully closed.”

Another person exited, leaving five in the room.

“Please stay if your object looks to be crying.”

Someone else stood and left. Four remaining in the room, three still to eliminate.

“If the mouth is slightly open, please stay.”

Three stayed in their seat as another left the room. Daire looked very frustrated and took longer to ask the next question than any of the previous questions.

“If you can see teeth on the mask, please leave.”

No one left. He shot out the next question.

“If you can see ears on the mask, please leave.”

No one left. He spit out the next question even more quickly.

“If you can see eyebrows on the mask, please stay.”

No one left. Daire had two more people to eliminate, and only two questions left to narrow them down to one. He looked nervous, sweat beading on his forehead as he huffed in frustration. He took a deep breath and sat silently, staring at the object in his box.

“If the mask is frowning, please stay.”

One person got up and left. Daire took in a stuttering breath. One last question, one more person to accurately eliminate.

“If your mask has no freckles or spots on its face, please stay.”

One person got up. There was only one person left, but Jane knew Daire had made a mistake. She remembered Kieran finding the mole on the face, it had been the last question Kiernan had asked. Perhaps there were no freckles, but there was definitely a spot.

The moderator walked in and asked Daire to reveal his object. When the other person revealed theirs, Daire clearly thought he'd made the match, smiling with a nod at the moderator.

“I'm sorry, Daire, you did not find the matching object and have not passed this round. Please pass through to check-out and know that I wish you all the best in future Questionings.”

Jane wasn't sure how to feel. She worried about Daire being eliminated over something so small. That mole Kiernan found couldn't be seen on the mirror they were watching from, so it had to be tiny. Did it really matter if someone didn't notice a single mole?

Jane wondered again about who was being eliminated. Good men like Daire. She was thrilled Kiernan was moving on and she knew in her heart of hearts, she wanted Kiernan to be the one for her, but if he wasn't... If she ended up with someone else, did she want to end up with someone else over something so trivial?

“You okay, Jane?” Roarke asked quietly. “Are you upset that Daire was eliminated?”

“I don’t know, Roarke. I’m worried at how easily he was eliminated. It was one thing when faceless people I don’t know didn’t make it through something. But Daire is a good man who just got eliminated over something very little. I worry about what that means for who I end up with.”

“It means you’ll end up with someone who notices the little things, Jane, and is able to talk to you about them and express himself. You said communication was important. Do you think you made the wrong choice?”

“No, I didn’t make the wrong choice. Communication is important to me. But I’m not sure that’s what was tested here. It seems more like I found out whether or not they were detail-oriented.”

“Maybe a little,” Roarke agreed. “But I will say with confidence, knowing Daire and Kiernan both, that Daire is not the world’s best communicator. Neither is Kiernan, sometimes, but he’s definitely better than Daire. I think the test still did what you wanted and weeded out those that aren’t the best communicators in the group. I was asking if you’re sad specifically about Daire leaving.”

Jane really thought about it, scanning her own feelings to see if she was upset. Really, Jane was most worried about who she would end up with. Right now, if it wasn’t Kiernan, it would be Seamus or a stranger.

For the first time, it really sank in for Jane that she could be moving in with a strange male she hadn’t met and living with him. That he might expect more than friendship from her. Was she sad about Daire leaving? Not really. She was only sad that there was one less person she had met.

“No,” she whispered in response. “No, I’m not. I’m not sure I would be sad about anyone leaving other than Kiernan.”

Roarke smiled at her.

“Then I hope he makes it through for you.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Roarke? What do men expect from the female after The Questioning? I don’t feel like I have enough information about

what happens next. Do the men expect the female to, like, get physical with them?”

Roarke looked disgusted.

“Absolutely not,” he said, shaking his head emphatically. “Pretty much everything is at the female’s pace. Think of it more like a friendship where both partners would be a good match for more. If one or the other isn’t interested in more, then friends they remain. I can’t say the males don’t hope for more, because there are only so many females to go around and a glamour only does so much to satisfy that itch.”

“What? A glamour?”

“Um, yeah,” Roarke said, his cheeks turning red. “That’s how most of our males stay halfway sane considering we don’t have many females.”

“I don’t understand. What is glamour? Your hand?”

Roarke sighed deeply, looking at her like she was pulling out his teeth.

“You’re going to make me spell it all out?”

“Please. I really don’t understand.” Jane felt like she needed a t-shirt that said ‘Explain It Again. Slower.’ She smiled at her own little joke.

“You do understand!”

“I don’t,” she said. “I was thinking that I needed a shirt to tell people I didn’t understand what was going on. That’s all. Please tell me what you mean. I need to know this stuff, Roarke.”

“I guess it’s like a doll for adults,” he said, one hand covering his face. “It’s life size, though, and has all of the orifices of a female and comes with a glamour stone you can adjust to your preferences.”

“Ohmygod, you have sex dolls here?”

“Pretty much.”

Jane couldn’t help it. She was curious.

“Okay, so I don’t want you to think I’m a perv, but I *need* more details. What does the glamour stone do exactly? Are you able to change it any time? Give it bigger boobs? A bigger butt? Does it make it more realistic? Is it interactive?”

Roarke looked like he was seconds from laughing in her face at her wide-eyed curiosity and the way she threw those questions out like word vomit.

“The glamour stone makes it so you can change the appearance at any time, yes—”

“While you’re... you know?”

“I guess you could. I never have. I don’t know, Jane. I don’t know what other people do. It’s very realistic, but still also has a slightly plastic feel. It’s not interactive, but it does, uh, encourage the user.”

Roarke’s face turned red as he answered her questions. It was adorable and Jane knew she should feel bad for embarrassing him and asking all of these questions, but she couldn’t help it. She needed to know.

“Encourage the user,” she said, prompting him to clarify.

“You know, moan. Say things like ‘oh, yeah.’ There’s a preset list it can rotate through.

“What do you make yours look like?”

“I am not telling you that!”

“Why not? I thought we were besties.”

“Jane. I am not telling you that.”

“But you have one.”

“Every male has one. It’s given to us at 16.”

“By who?”

“No one. Each male goes to the store and registers as an adult. They take one home from there that day.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Is it? Aggression in males went down drastically the year it was introduced. It’s just a way of life for us now.”

Jane didn't know what to say. She imagined a person-sized sex doll in Roarke's closet and had to keep her chuckle in. She figured it was better to have something like that than a bunch of horny guys going around putting females in danger or something, but it was all so different than what she was used to. There was so much different here.

Jane didn't realize how long she'd been sitting quietly until Roarke interrupted her meandering thoughts.

"Let's go get some dinner, Jane." He held out a hand to help her stand and they started walking out the door, back through the same hallway towards the room where they had lunch.

"With your family?"

"No, it is not only the males that are secluded for The Questioning. Females are, as well, although they are allowed interactions with their seconds and any who work on The Questioning, like Thomas or Liam. Just the two of us will grab dinner. All of our meals are in the same room where we had lunch today. Afterward, you will head to the room set aside for the female hosting each Questioning. That is where you will stay until breakfast. Try not to worry, though, as there are books in there to keep you entertained."

After a quiet dinner with only Roarke for company, Jane went into her room and read until she fell asleep. That night she dreamed of having elegant fairy wings that matched Kiernan's and a beautiful baby with tiny sparkling wings of their own.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JANE WOKE TO knocking on her door. She stumbled over to it and opened it to find Thomas.

“Good Morning, Jane! Are you ready for the final round? It’s time for you to ask your questions. I’m so excited.”

He seemed excited, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he talked a mile a minute. Jane felt foggy, like she’d slept for a year and wasn’t ready to wake from her hibernation.

“Ugh.”

“Now, Jane, I know you’re excited, too. Let’s take you over to Liam and I’ll talk you through these final rounds while you eat and get ready for the day.”

Jane turned around to pick out something to wear when Thomas came right in and told her not to bother.

“Liam’s got an outfit and shoes selected for you already. Just handle your morning hygiene and whatever females do.”

Jane giggled. Whatever females do. What did he think they did every morning? Jane became just alert enough to realize this was her chance for a little, tiny bit of revenge. He’d told her dark wings meant evil fairies. He really did deserve something in return.

“Thanks, Thomas,” she answered, pretending to be just as sleepy and unawake. “My beautification dance should only take about forty-five minutes and then I’ll just brush my teeth before we go. Did you want to wait or come back?”

“Your what now?”

“My beautification dance. Human females do it every morning to prevent our skin from wrinkling too quickly and our hair from falling out.”

Jane closed her eyes and dropped into a slight crouch, knees bent out, arms hanging down in the middle. Then she started swaying from right to left, bouncing a bit while humming.

She bounced harder, bending her elbows out to each side as she raised her fists up and down repeatedly. She started grunting awkwardly just for effect. Jane threw her head back and let out a loud hum.

From the few female fae she'd seen, Jane knew they were graceful, dignified beauties and there was no way Thomas had ever seen a female doing the ridiculously awkward grunting crouch dance she was currently performing.

She peeked through her closed eyes and barely held in a laugh at Thomas' horrified face.

"And you do this for forty-five minutes?" His voice was an octave higher than normal. "Every day?"

Jane was ready to tell him that sometimes it was even longer and more frequent, but she couldn't stop her own giggles. When Thomas frowned at her, she lost all control.

"Jane, that wasn't nice at all," he said, eyebrows pulled down in consternation.

"If you had dark, evil wings, you would have found it funny, though," Jane said with a smirk.

"I see," Thomas replied, holding in his smile for another minute before laughing himself. "You looked... *deranged*, Jane. Absolutely deranged. All I could think was... I don't even know what I thought. That human women were crazy."

Thomas was still laughing when she finished her brushing her teeth and they started walking down the hall. When they arrived, Roarke was eating breakfast, a domed plate cover at the seat next to him, and Liam was lounging on a chair.

"You will never believe what Jane just pulled..." Thomas said before going into the entire dance Jane performed, describing her movements and noises in detail to the laughter of the others. Jane got through her whole breakfast and was

sitting in a chair waiting for Liam when Thomas finished the story.

“... and then she said, ‘If you had dark, evil wings, you would have found it funny, though,’ in her prissiest voice, nailing me right back. It was a riot.”

Liam started working on her hair after he got his laughter under control.

“You really are one of a kind,” Roarke mused, shaking his head at her.

“Not many people can pull one over on Thomas,” Liam said, starting to braid sections of her hair, “though I’m not surprised to hear he got you first. That’s one of his favorite things to do.”

“The opportunity just presented itself,” she answered. “I couldn’t let it go. It was too perfect.”

“About today,” Thomas said, “there are 18 participants remaining in your Questioning. You’ve got 15 questions you may ask to narrow them down. Do you understand how this round will work?”

Liam ushered her over to a small changing room, handing her an outfit to change into.

“No, can you go over it? I want to make sure I know what’s coming.”

She pulled on the dress Liam had selected, but struggled with the straps. She peeked her face out and cut off Thomas’ response, asking Liam to help her. He came around after checking she was covered up enough for him to enter and started helping her adjust everything on the dress.

“So you’ve got up to 15 questions, Jane. All 18 of the remaining participants will be in separate rooms and so will you. You’ll select the first question to ask on your crystal and all of the males will write in their answer on their own crystals. As soon as they submit, the answer comes directly to your crystal. You can wait until you have all 18 responses or eliminate as you go. It’s up to you, as you’ll literally see the option to accept, reject, or hold for each answer. Hold just

means a maybe and you have to come back to that answer to make your final decision before the next question. The option to ‘hold’ the answer is chosen most frequently on the last questions when there are only a few males and you’re trying to choose which one to select as your finalist. Once you’ve whittled it down to your single finalist, we go live for your meeting. You need to be prepared for that.”

Jane came out from behind the changing room, Liam trailing.

“Is that why I’m so dressed up?”

And she was. Jane just needed glass slippers to turn her ball gown into a Cinderella costume. It was full skirted to the floor, with so many layers of tulle that it would be uncomfortable to sit in. It was sleeveless with a sweetheart neckline, all held in place by a ton of glittery straps criss-crossed over the back. And it was white.

“It looks like a wedding dress,” she said uncomfortably.

“I think it’s meant to look like a mating dress, yes,” Thomas said with a nod. He shrugged his shoulders. “Our version of a wedding dress for sure.”

“It’s not a mating dress, though,” Roarke cut in, noting Jane’s anxiety at Thomas’ response. “It’s more a wish for the possibility of a compatible match that might lead to mating.”

Jane wasn’t sure how much better that was. It felt like a chain and it was worrisome. She was in over her head and doing the doggie paddle trying very hard to take it moment by moment so she didn’t run screaming from all the crazy, but this was a bit much.

“You do not have to wear this, Jane,” Roarke said softly, putting a hand on her shoulder in support.

“But you should look in the mirror before you decide because you look like a dream,” cut in Thomas.

When she looked in the mirror, she melted a little. It was gorgeous. There was glitter all over the white, making the dress look almost as though it was covered in snowflakes. The

neckline emphasized her breasts and made her shoulders look elegant.

Her hair was in a full updo with tiny braids adding visual interest. Her makeup was incredibly subtle, in soft pinks with white accents, making it look like her cheeks had been kissed by a cold wind. She even had sparkling silver heels on that were somehow comfortable to walk in.

“Yeah, I’ll wear it,” she said wistfully.

“Good,” Liam replied with a smug smile. He knew he’d done well.

“One last touch, though,” Roarke said as he pulled out a velvet box and opened it for her. “Mother sent this along for you.”

Jane gasped. Inside the box was an intricate necklace studded with what looked like pearls, diamonds and emeralds. It was shorter, almost a choker, and looked like someone had covered a small tree branch in silver before dotting it with pearls and diamonds. Different sizes of emeralds were set into place to look like leaves on the branches.

“Before you say no,” Roarke continued, “know that it is a loan just for the day. She said she would be honored if you would wear it. And it would be rude to turn it down.”

“Really? It’d be rude to turn it down?” Jane hoped that was the case. Because she really wanted to wear the breathtaking necklace. When Roarke nodded, she did, too, and he helped her get it on.

“You look like a princess, Jane,” Thomas said with a genuine smile, causing a shiver to run down Jane’s back, leaving behind an itch she couldn’t scratch. Again.

“Thank you, Thomas. And Liam for the help and Roarke for the support. I don’t know how I could have handled this without you.”

“Aw, Jane, you would have just done your Beautification Dance a few extra times for a few extra minutes is all,” Thomas replied with a cheeky wink, causing everyone to laugh as they left the room and walked down the halls.

Roarke gave Jane a kiss on the cheek at the doorway to another room. When Jane looked at him in question, he gave her shoulder a pat.

“I can’t go with you for this one,” he said. “You have to make these choices without outside influence.”

“What? Will I be in this room alone?”

“I’ll be here with the male handling your mirroring,” Thomas said. “Some of this will be shown to the public, but you don’t need to worry. Haven’t I made sure you look amazing the whole time? I won’t show anyone if you’re picking your nose. This part isn’t live so try to relax as much as you can.”

“Thomas will let me know if you need a touchup or anything,” Liam added with a warm smile. “I’ll definitely see you at least once more before you go live, though.”

“You’ll be amazing, Jane,” Roarke said sincerely. “As lame as this sounds, listen to your heart and let it lead your choices. Try to put some trust in the process if you can. You don’t know who wrote each answer for a reason.”

Jane nodded and sat in the seat Thomas indicated. He handed her a crystal and showed her how it worked, giving her a fake question she could mess around with. The whole thing reminded her of an iPhone with an app for multiple choice questions.

She looked through the 15 questions and was pleased to notice the five questions she’d come up with together with the queen were written in a different color, just to stand out. She decided which she’d send off first and looked up to Thomas. He nodded at her.

“Whenever you’re ready, Darling, just pick the first question and wait for the answers to come in. Know that we’re capturing all of this starting now, okay?”

She nodded and tapped on her first question.

What single trait do you find most important in a partner?

She inhaled quickly when responses started coming in almost instantaneously. They stacked on her little crystal screen almost like text messages, and she knew she could select each one individually to choose whether to accept, reject, or hold the answer.

-Honesty

-Sense of Humor

-High Sex Drive

-Sense of Fun

-Respect

-Caring

-Honest

-Patient

-Sense of Humor

-Family Oriented

-Sexually Adventurous

-Honest

-Interested in a permanent mate bond

-Honesty

-Loving

-Open Communication

-Ability to Compromise

-Needs Physical Touch

Jane looked at her stack of answers and didn't even know what to think. She had to wonder if the men that had written honesty only chose that answer because it was known to be one of her top traits. And if someone answered differently than she did, should she eliminate them? Or appreciate the answer as long as she also found it an important trait?

Jane decided to accept all of the answers that she found to be necessary traits in a partner. Not just important traits, but

necessary. There were things she'd like to have, but weren't necessary, and she'd eliminate those.

So she eliminated only a few: High Sex Drive and Sexually Adventurous because while those were nice, it wasn't a deal breaker for her. Interested in a permanent mate bond, because that shouldn't be the absolute most important thing for a partner. She struggled with needs physical touch before deciding to accept that one. He didn't specify sexual touch and she felt that was an important distinction. She thought she'd eliminate a lot this round, but only sent home three.

This was harder than she thought it would be.

She moved on to the next question, hoping it would help her narrow things down.

What is your single favorite trait about yourself?

Again, the answers came pouring in. It took less than three minutes for all 15 to arrive in her crystal. She scrolled through the list as they came in.

-Kind

-Trustworthy

-Hot

-Caring

-My Body

-Sense of Humor

-Honesty

-Wealthy

-Affectionate

-Sexy

-Patient

-Sexually Experienced

-Truthful

-The Whole Package

-Genuine

She immediately rejected Hot, My Body, Wealthy, Sexy, Sexually Experienced, and The Whole Package. None of those would be listed as her dream man's defining feature. She paused only on Affectionate before accepting. She didn't love it as the top trait, but it wasn't necessarily a bad one, either.

She counted her acceptances and realized she still had 9 men participating. She moved on to the next question.

How would you handle it if someone insulted me in public?

The answers were slower to come in this time and she was surprised at the range.

-Kick their ass.

-Ask them to apologize.

-Threaten them.

-Give them a beat down.

-Demand an apology.

-Ask how you wanted to handle it.

-Correct them and tell them to apologize.

-Let you handle it yourself.

-Send them to a healer.

She rejected the three most violent ones right off the bat: Kick their ass, Give them a beat down, and Send them to a healer. Her hesitation this round was the one that said Threaten them. Did they mean physically? Or demand an apology? She wasn't sure, so she eliminated them, figuring they could have said it differently if it wasn't physical threats.

She had five men left. Holy cow. It had only been about half an hour and she went from 18 to 5 participants. She looked up at Thomas and he gave her an encouraging wink. She decided to just keep going until Thomas told her to stop. She looked at her last two questions and switched the order they were in, clicking the next one over to the remaining men.

What would be your response if I asked you to do something that you didn't want to do?

This was the first one that seemed to really take some time before responses came in. When they did, though, they were good. It would be tough to continue narrowing things down.

-I'd do it anyway. A partnership is doing things you don't want to do sometimes.

-I'd talk to you about a compromise. You should be able to meet in the middle. If we couldn't, I would probably just do it, but I'd try to find middle ground first.

-I wouldn't do it if I didn't want to do it.

-I'd talk to you about it. I'm not saying I wouldn't do it, but I would need to know why you were asking me to do something that I didn't want to do. If you had a good reason, I'd do it, even if I didn't want to.

-It would depend on what it was and why I didn't want to do it. If I have moral concerns about what you're asking me to do, I hope we could talk about it and make a better choice for the two of us where you didn't ask me to do whatever it is. If I was being lazy and just didn't want to run out for groceries, I'd suck it up and do it.

Jane went ahead and tapped reject on the one that said he wouldn't do it if he didn't want to do it. He had no additional reasoning or qualifiers and that wasn't a good enough answer for her. She struggled with the first response that said he'd do it anyway and that a partnership is about doing things you don't want to do sometimes.

After giving it some thought, she rejected that answer, too. While she agreed with the sentiment, the answer was too simplistic. She was looking for a soulmate, which meant she was looking for more, for deeper.

She had three men left to participate. She wondered briefly if one of them was Kiernan. Or Seamus. Or if they'd been eliminated. She wished she could see them as they left so she would know.

Then again, it might be best that she didn't know who was eliminated. She still had hope right now that Kiernan was a possibility.

She clicked the last question she'd created with the queen, hoping she wouldn't need any of the others.

How do you show someone you care?

This was another question that took some time for the answers to arrive. Jane was nervous, feeling her toes tapping on the floor with anxiety. She kept fidgeting in her seat, worried about what came next. What came after this. What if she hated the final man? The answers started to roll in, thankfully pulling her focus.

-I tell them. Loudly and often. It's important to be told someone cares, so I expect my partner to do the same. Relationships should be give and take like that.

-With the little things. I'd cook things they like and give them gifts to show I was thinking about them. I'd get to know them and do the things that would make them feel cared for.

-With every beat of my heart, I show them. I put their needs above my own. I strive for their happiness. I tell them how much I care at every opportunity. I make time to spend together. I do whatever I can, every day, to make sure they feel like the most special person in any realm. At least, that is what I would want to do if I met someone I truly cared for. I have not met that person yet, so I am not sure how exactly it might go. But I have had the privilege of seeing a great love and hope to find my own, following in their example of how to treat a beloved partner.

Jane read all of them, putting them on hold as she went until she got to the last answer. She read the last answer a second time, heart beating fast. This was her choice.

She rejected the first two quickly and then looked at Thomas.

"I've selected my finalist. Do I hit accept on his answer now?"

"No, not yet. We want to catch all of this live."

She clicked hold and held the crystal out towards Thomas with shaky hands.

“What’s next, Thomas?”

“I’ll call in Liam and he’ll do a quick touchup before we take you to his room where you two will meet live with the public able to watch.”

Jane wasn’t sure if she was more excited or terrified, she just knew she felt sick.

She sent up one last prayer, hoping it would be Kiernan, before she firmly shut that train of thought down.

She needed to be open to the man she would actually meet, whether it was Kiernan or not.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LIAM RUSHED INTO the room and hovered around Jane like a hummingbird, swiping a makeup brush here and sweeping away a stray hair there. It felt like seconds and hours simultaneously as she waited to go into the finalist's room to tell him she chose him.

“Is there something I’m supposed to say?” Jane wasn’t sure if there was something specific that needed to be said for this, but wanted to say the right thing.

“Just tell him you chose him,” Thomas suggested. “There isn’t a script. I think the nerves would prevent anyone from sticking to a script anyway.”

Jane figured he was right. She was still concerned she might vomit.

“You ready?”

She didn’t even know if it was Thomas or Liam that asked, but she didn’t think waiting longer would make her more ready, so she said yes.

It was a lie.

Jane wasn’t ready. In fact, she felt like the reality of this entire world was crashing onto her. She’d allowed herself to keep moving for days without giving much thought to what happened after The Questioning. She understood the basics. She’d be moving in with a random guy.

But she hadn’t really thought about the fact that she would actually be *moving in with a random guy*. It was like the first semester of freshman year of college when you move into your dorm and have no idea what to expect beyond that little sheet of information about your roommate. But it’s worse

because this roommate is hoping you'll fall in love, stay forever and want to have babies.

What had she done? What had she agreed to? Why hadn't she given this more thought?

Jane had never thought of herself as spontaneous or impulsive. But this? This was impulsive in the stupidest way she'd ever allowed. She couldn't believe she'd gotten caught up in the idea that this might find her a soulmate. The whole idea was ridiculous.

She felt dizzy with worry and disbelief at the circumstances she'd put herself in.

Then she was walking behind Thomas, Liam nowhere to be seen, until they came to a door. She surfaced out of her swirling thoughts.

"This is it, Jane," Thomas whispered.

"Do you know who it is?" Jane asked, breathing fast and feeling sick.

"I do," Thomas nodded, still whispering.

"Tell me who it is," Jane begged.

"I can't. But I know him. He's a good male, Jane."

Jane nodded, stomach twisting in a complicated knot. She pasted a smile on her face and promised herself she wouldn't let it fall. She couldn't do that to someone, show disappointment in her choice. It wasn't fair and it wasn't right. She could secretly hope for Kiernan, but she needed to give a fair shot to whomever stood on the other side of the door and she knew it was seriously unlikely to be Kiernan.

She took a breath and opened the door. She started speaking before the door was even fully open.

"Hi, I'm Jane and I chose..."

And there he was, looking like every dream she'd ever had. His thick blond locks were hanging messily to his shoulders in disarray, as though he'd run his hands through his hair more than once. He was dressed sharply in dark grey to

match his gleaming wings. Sitting tensely, all of his muscles were locked as he sat stone-still. He would look forbidding if not for the messy hair and slight shine of fear in his eyes.

She was able to watch the anxiety drain from him, first from his bright blue eyes as they softened on her face and then from his mouth. It had been in a tight, firm line, but relaxed into a small, hopeful smile. He leaned forward from his chair, wonder crossing his features.

Kiernan.

It was Kiernan! She chose Kiernan? She couldn't believe it. How was this possible? Oh my goodness, she chose Kiernan. What were the odds?

"Me," he breathed in response, not moving from his chair. "You chose me, Jane."

"I chose you, Kiernan," she responded in her own whispered breath.

And then they were in each other's arms and Kiernan was whispering in her ear.

"I had hoped. I hoped the whole time that it would be me, Jane. I knew you were mine. I knew it. Mine."

Kiernan's head lowered, his lips caressing hers. His tongue running along her lower lip, seeking entry. She moaned, parting for him before he pulled back. His eyes were hooded and she could feel him against her belly, causing a delicious rushing sensation deep inside of her. She didn't know why he'd pulled away until he turned her back towards his chest and wrapped his arms around her, facing Thomas and effectively covering his obvious erection in one move.

Shit, Thomas!

Cameras!

Well, what she knew as cameras, anyway, because this was live.

Thomas looked at her, eyes twinkling in mischievous delight.

“With a kiss like that, I suppose you’re both happy with the match made this day?”

“I am unbelievably honored to be chosen,” Kiernan said firmly while she finished catching her breath from that panty-soaking kiss.

“Y-yes,” Jane said, strengthening her voice when it shook, knowing she needed to say more than that for a public that would undoubtedly be watching the first human-fae Questioning. “I’m thrilled with the result of this Questioning. I would have been honored with any result, as I believe the Fae Realm to be full of worthy males, but I am delighted to see Prince Kiernan here right now. Especially since we met before the Questioning began and I felt a possible connection.”

Thomas made a small motion towards the back of a room before he smiled a wide, genuine smile that reached across his face.

“We’re not live any longer,” Thomas said. “I am somehow not surprised at all that it’s ended this way. Even with over a hundred males, there was definitely a spark between you two. I saw it myself. I hope the outcome results in a bonding, should you both wish it. You’re all done here.”

“But what happens now?” Jane asked.

“You come to my wing of the castle,” Kiernan growled. “You’re not in the guest quarters anymore. You’re with me.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Thomas mumbled, exiting the room with the other members of his crew.

“So we just move in together? I move into the castle for real?”

“Yes,” Kiernan answered. He took her hand and started to lead her out of the ballroom and towards a wing of the castle she hadn’t seen before.

Jane looked at their clasped hands and sighed on the inside. She felt so much relief. Happiness. She’d chosen Kiernan. And here he was, holding her hand as they walked down the hall. He was hers. And she was his.

At least for the next 30 days.

Kiernan either figured out her thoughts or had the same ones, because he lifted her hand and kissed their interlocked fingers. Her heart gave a little pitter-patter at the sweet gesture. She looked up into his eyes and sucked in a sharp breath when she saw the heat there. He took a step towards her, backing her towards a wall. With their fingers still interlocked, he raised one hand and pressed it against the wall above her head, pinning her in place.

Jane's breath came out in a ragged gasp at the sexy move, her eyes shuttering halfway closed in desire. Kiernan leaned down, eyes closing as his lips closed the distance to hers.

“Ahem.”

A deliberate cough came from their left. Jane jerked back, slamming her head into the wall behind her. She'd been leaning towards Kiernan's kiss just enough to leave the perfect gap to bruise her skull with the startled movement.

Jane turned beet red when she realized they had been waylaid by King Cormac and Queen Melody. She ducked behind Kiernan a bit to hide her embarrassment, but tried not to make it obvious.

“We just saw,” Queen Melody said lightly in her bell-like voice. Jane whimpered, mortified they were calling her out on the hallway make-out session she was attempting with Kiernan.

“Yes, well, I do apologize for the impropriety,” Kiernan said, “and we will make every attempt to be more circumspect in the future. The hallway is not an appropriate place to... become more familiar with each other.”

The king let out a loud guffaw.

“We saw that you were chosen, Kiernan,” he said between wheezes. “She didn't mean just now. Good gracious you're old enough to steal a kiss in the hallway if that's what you desire.”

“We wanted to congratulate you both,” Melody said, a tinkling laugh escaping before she focused on Jane. “And I also wanted to let you know that if you need anything, I'm still

here to help you. As a friend or even, perhaps, as possible future family.”

“Mother!” Kiernan bit out. “There’s no need to put any pressure on Jane. Let things unfold on their own, please. *Please.*”

“Of course,” Melody replied, gracefully bowing her head to her son. The king spoke, breaking the tension Jane could feel mounting.

“Will you join us for dinner?”

Kiernan didn’t even look back at Jane before responding.

“Not tonight. I think we need to spend some time with just the two of us.”

It irked her a tiny bit that he replied without getting her input in any way. Okay, part of her felt relief for a more private dinner so as not to be on display after The Questioning, but the other part of her felt nervous for a more private dinner with just Kiernan. No part of her enjoyed being spoken for. Jane reminded herself that he’d just gone through a multi-day event, jumping through metaphorical hoop after metaphorical hoop, all so that she might choose him. She should allow some grace. He probably needed to feel in control after having so very little of it.

“CONGRATULATIONS, YOU TWO!”

Roarke boomed his congratulations from the end of the hall, walking their way with a grin on his face. Kiernan sighed. Loudly.

“Thank you, Brother,” Kiernan replied before Jane could speak. “We’re both excited.”

Jane’s ire rose. She didn’t appreciate being spoken for *again* and he still hadn’t looked at her since his parents arrived. There’s needing some control, and then there’s being controlling. She could make allowances for one, but wouldn’t for the other.

“I appreciate all of your support through The Questioning, Roarke,” she inserted. “You helped keep me grounded when

everything seemed to be moving so quickly. And Melody, the rounds were brilliant. I couldn't have asked for a better person to be in my corner."

"Of course, dear," Melody answered with a sweet smile.

"Yes, thank you, Mother," Kiernan bit out, "for the psychological game we just played."

Jane raised her eyes in surprise to Kiernan before guilt flooded her. He was right, in a way. The queen may have been a help to Jane, but to Kiernan, she designed the maze he had to run. And it was his mother, not hers.

Jane felt uncomfortable and went to pull away from Kiernan. Should she apologize? This was so awkward.

"You know I believe in The Questioning," Melody stated. "I believe that the right people end up together if they're both being honest with themselves and each other throughout the process. Jane is significantly more self-aware than Brigid ever was. The Questioning has never been a game to me, only an opportunity to show your character in full and see if it matches another."

"We are not discussing Brigid."

Kiernan sounded colder than he'd ever been. Hard and angry. How did they go from kissing in the hallway, holding hands like children, to him spitting at his family while she felt like she'd stepped in a mess she hadn't known was there? And how did she fix it?

"Um, well, the guys wanted to come congratulate you both during dinner," Roarke said slowly.

"We won't be joining you for dinner," Kiernan repeated his choice from earlier. "Jane and I need some time, just the two of us. We appreciate your excitement, but perhaps we'll join you for a meal tomorrow. I'll let you know once I've decided."

Once he decided? Was it because he was royal? Was he used to giving orders? Jane wasn't sure. She hoped it was a simple overstep from the stress of The Questioning.

Otherwise, she'd have to wonder who exactly she'd chosen. Jane was starting to worry The Questioning might be flawed. But it was too late. She'd be moving in with Kiernan. It was all a done deal. She'd just need to pull on her big-girl panties and talk to him. He couldn't speak for her. This wouldn't work, even as friends, even for only 30 days, if he couldn't treat her as an equal.

Kiernan's family all nodded at him, saying another congratulations before Kiernan tugged gently on her hand to encourage her to follow him as he left. Jane stayed quiet as they walked. He pulled her into what looked almost like the suite she'd shared with dorm mates in college. He guided her around the space, pointing out the living area, the 'kitchenette' that was larger than the kitchen in her own apartment in New York, the dining area, and a small bathroom.

Then he pulled her down a hall, telling her that it was the sleeping quarters for his suite. Apparently his suite came with four bedrooms, two of which were set up as twin master suites.

"It's set up as a his-and-hers space," he shared. He pointed to an open door showing hints of a dark, masculine bedroom. "That is my private bedroom and ensuite bath, where this door leads to yours. You have an ensuite, as well. There is a connecting door in between our rooms that locks from both sides."

Jane walked into the room he'd indicated was hers. It was stark. The few pieces of furniture were empty of anything and nothing decorated the cream walls. The bed had a bare mattress within the four poster frame. She looked at him in confusion, but his face was granite.

He looked as closed-off as he had the first night they met. Why was he moving backwards? Was this about the first woman that had chosen him? Had she stayed here? Jane assumed her name was Brigid after hearing what his mother said in the halls, but Jane felt uncomfortable bringing it up right now. She wanted to bring back his sexy smile and the heat she'd seen in his eyes, but Jane realized she didn't know how.

The more Jane thought about it, the more it sunk in that she didn't know Kiernan at all. Being sexy, having a hot connection, that wasn't the same. She knew Roarke loads better than Kiernan. She'd not even spent much time with Kiernan.

Jane started to hyperventilate. She felt like things were spinning out of control and now Kiernan was back to being a distant, cold stranger.

“Jane, are you alright?”

She didn't know how, but he was kneeling in front of her and she hadn't seen him move. He had both hands on her shoulders and she had a brief thought wondering about his exact height because his face was nearly level with hers from this angle.

“Jane, tell me why you are upset. Please, Jane.”

His face was pleading, eyes begging, worry etching frown lines around his mouth. No longer a statue, Kiernan looked concerned and it helped calm her down.

“I'm just... moving in with you,” she said softly, still breathing heavily. “We barely know each other.”

“We will get to know each other,” Kiernan said earnestly. “It will be a joy to learn about you. I look forward to the time we will spend together. Do you feel the same?”

Jane felt a ball of anxiety in her chest, beating against her breasts from the inside. This Kiernan, yes, she looked forward to getting to know. But Stoic Kiernan that made choices for her and felt a million miles away? She wasn't too sure she wanted to spend any time in his company. She swallowed that thought down and nodded.

“I shall put in the order to get your things moved into your new room. Come lounge in one of the comfortable chairs in our living room and I will request some sparkling kiseo juice be brought to us.”

“Yes, please,” Jane answered woodenly, still a little lost in her thoughts.

She couldn't stop everything racing around in her head. She hoped he could relax and let her in. For the first time in her life, she'd jumped into something instead of running away. All for the hope of love, a soulmate, maybe even a family.

But could Kiernan let her in and treat her like a partner? And if he could, would she consider staying in Fairie permanently?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THERE WAS NO better way to say it, fairies were cool as fuck. The only person she'd seen other than Kiernan in the last hour was the younger guy that had brought them fresh juice, but Kiernan's crystal chimed and then he said she could check out her room.

He walked back with her and it was a miracle he wasn't needed to keep her standing when she saw the room. To make the complete change to her quarters in the hour they were gone should have taken a herd of interior decorators and a jumbo jet of helpers. Even the wall and ceiling colors had changed.

The room was done up in different jewel tones that matched the dresses she'd worn the last few days. She had a plush plum comforter underneath a dark, shimmering silvery canopy for the bed. Abstract art in different colors adorned the walls. The vanity held all of the potions and make-ups she'd been given. The armoire was full when she opened it. All of her things were already here with everything in its place.

So, yeah. Fairies were cool as fuck and Jane turned a little green as jealousy bloomed within her. While she'd always strived to be a confident woman who genuinely liked herself, seeing the magic in this world made her wish that she had her own.

And she let out a happy little squeak when Kiernan reached into her armoire bottom drawer and set a pair of puff ball slippers at her feet. The same ones she'd worn two nights ago when he kissed her for the first time.

"I love these!"

"And you look adorably sexy in them, so if you love them, I hope you will wear them more often."

“Well, twist my arm, Kiernan,” she smiled, happily changing into her pale pink Tinker Bell slippers.

“I ordered dinner at the same time as the juice,” Kiernan mentioned. “It should be here shortly. You do not need to change, but if you want to be more comfortable, you certainly could make any adjustments you like.”

Was he telling her to slip into something more comfortable? Jane stopped a giggle. She wondered if he knew that he sounded like an eighties porno.

She looked at her massive wedding-mating-ball gown dress. She’d barely been able to get out of the chair she’d sat in for the last hour. In fact, she’d had to ask for Kiernan’s help.

“That’d be nice. Can I meet you out there?”

“Yes, thank you,” he said formally. She sighed. Two steps forward, one step back. It was time to address it with him if she wanted any chance of actually getting to know him and starting some kind of friendship. Maybe she was hoping it would turn into a relationship, but for now, she’d be happy with a solid friend. She thought about his muscles and dangerously sexy smile. Friend with benefits?

Definitely with benefits.

Jane chose a silky lounge outfit to change into. The tank was cream and low-cut with no sleeves, just tiny straps with the open back. It had matching long pants. She selected a pair of lace panties and tried not to be uncomfortable that Fairie didn’t have bras. It felt like cool water flowing on her skin, which was marvelous after the itchier tulle skirt of the dress. She gently removed the necklace she’d borrowed from the queen, setting it on top of her vanity. She slid her Tink slippers back on her feet and went down the hall to Kiernan.

She stopped in the doorway to the main room, surprised to see Kiernan backlit by candlelight. His eyes heated up when he noticed her there and he was in front of her in a few strides. He hadn’t changed clothes, but had taken off his shoes. Did fairies wear socks? She didn’t think so. No one had given her

socks, at least. Either way, his bare feet peeked out from under long pants. Why was that sexy?

She shook her head before she looked back up and saw his lips turned up on one side, as if he was contemplating what exactly he wanted to eat for dinner: the food or her? The overall effect was devastating and her knees weakened as her temperature rose.

“You look more delicious than dinner, Jane,” Kiernan growled. She felt herself growing damp. That growl should be illegal. “I should eat you instead.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” she joked, trying to get control of the situation.

They needed to talk.

Jane couldn’t spend her time waiting for the portal to open bouncing between a sexy Dr. Jekyll and a stone-cold Mr. Hyde. It could be five days, 30 days, or eternity. It was all up in the air and Jane preferred to have a concrete plan and path to follow.

Jane shook her head to clear the lustful thoughts and patted his shoulder and she brushed past him to a seat at the table. He stalked after her, the tension in the air making her shudder.

“I was hoping we could talk,” Jane said as she sat down and uncovered the plate at the seat. She looked up at Kiernan after a too-long pause. His face was closed down. No heat, no hunger. Jane let out a little frustrated growl. Did the fae have “we should talk” as a warning phrase, too? It was absurd.

“I want to get to know you,” she tried again. “I was hoping you’d tell me more about yourself now that it’s just us.”

The skin pulled taut around his eyes relaxed a bit. Jane didn’t know how she would figure out the puzzle that was Kiernan.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything,” Jane laughed, happy that he was engaging. “What’s your favorite color? What do you like to do in your spare time? What’s your favorite food?”

She continued in her own head. Why do you shut down at the drop of a hat?

Kiernan smiled over at her, a genuine, wide smile that she wasn't sure she'd seen fully before this moment. She sighed inwardly at how handsome he was, but smiled back at him, hoping he'd open up with some of her easy questions.

“Did you not ask enough questions today, Jane?”

Jane chuckled at his response. She did indeed ask a lot of questions today.

“That's not the same,” she answered evenly. “I want to know about you, Kiernan. Will you share with me?”

His eyes softened further while his smile gentled.

“I'll share with you. Black is my favorite color and our chef makes an amazing kiseo cake that's like nothing you've ever tasted.”

“I have no doubt on that. Most of the foods in this world are like nothing I've ever tasted, whether that be something delicious or something awful.”

Kiernan chuckled at her response.

“I suppose that's true enough. My favorite hobbies are reading, running, and working out.”

“I love to read.”

“What else do you like to do, Jane?”

“I'm not sure. I used to go on walks a lot. I enjoyed seeing new buildings and finding secret spots of beauty in the chaos of the city. But I was working most of the time.”

“You worked?”

“Of course. Most people do where I'm from.”

“What did you do for work?”

“I was a waitress. The other guys said it was like a barman here.”

Kiernan's eyes went wide at her words. She didn't understand why that was shocking and realized it had never

been fully explained to her.

“Why is that shocking here? What do women do all day long?”

“Some of the women here do work, but I can’t imagine any working in a pub. Most of them are on committees of some sort. Any job where you are surrounded by males as they slowly grow more and more intoxicated seems like a precarious choice.”

“In my world, you worked or you lived on the streets. We aren’t given housing and food. They have to be purchased.”

“Truly? Why aren’t you given the basic standards of care? As a ruler myself, I do not understand, as we strive to make sure all of our people have food and shelter at the very minimum.”

“I don’t understand either. It’s just the way it is.” Jane shrugged. Not like she could change anything. She wasn’t in charge of things.

“You are here now and we would never allow you to go hungry or homeless. Let’s talk about happier things. Tell me your favorite things.”

Jane smiled at him, happy to change the subject.

“Purple is my favorite color and my favorite food is bananas with Nutella spread on each bite.”

At Kiernan’s confused look, she elaborated as best she could.

“It’s a soft fruit that gets sweeter the longer it ripens. I like it less ripe than most, but with a sugary-nutty topping. It’s good.”

“I know what a banana is. I just didn’t know about the topping.”

“Sorry. It’s hard to know what you know.”

Kiernan nodded, easily accepting her words, before he cleared his throat. Jane thought she saw a light red flush stain his cheeks.

“I asked the chef to send some kiseo cake. I wanted you to try my favorite.”

Jane felt a warm glow at his words. Even before she asked, he was trying to share himself with her.

“I’d love to try your favorite.”

They’d finished dinner with the conversation, so Kiernan offered to cut her a slice. She accepted and her eyes went wide when she took a bite.

“Kiseo is the best fruit ever, Kiernan. In a cake it’s just...” Jane kissed the tip of her fingers in a chef’s kiss.

He grinned at her response and then started on his own cake slice. Jane took a few more bites of the delicious dessert. When she looked up, Kiernan was staring at her hungrily, intent on her face. More specifically, he was staring at her mouth.

Jane worried she’d been eating with her mouth open until Kiernan spoke, his voice huskier than usual.

“You’ve got cream right there,” he brushed his finger on the corner of her mouth, coming away with a smudge of the cake’s frosting. She inhaled shakily when he stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked off the frosting. “Delicious.”

Jane felt her blood start to rush through her veins. This man was so damn hot. Kiernan grabbed the base of her seat and yanked the chair closer to him, making sure she was close enough for their legs to touch from thigh to ankle.

“Finish your cake before I decide to make good on my earlier threat and eat you for dessert.”

Jane shivered, goosebumps breaking out along her arms as her nipples stiffened. Her silk blouse made the action obvious and Kiernan’s nostrils flared when he noticed. She clenched her thighs and realized he felt that, too, when he put his hand on her leg.

“Jane...”

She reached down and ran a finger through the frosting. Looking Kiernan in the eye, she dragged it across her chest,

just above the neckline of her tank top.

“Oops,” she whispered, watching the fire in his eyes blaze hotter.

Kiernan pushed the table away from them both and scooped her up easily in his arms, shifting her until she was plastered like a koala across his chest. She wrapped her legs around him and ran her fingers through his hair as he licked the frosting she'd spread across her chest.

She allowed one hand to run along his wing, watching in surprise as his full body shuddered in response. His wings reminded her of her skin after a deep tissue massage with warming oils— silky smooth and warm, but still sturdy. Closer now, she could see the shimmer in the grey, like secret stars peeking out from the masculine color. She did it a second time and he groaned, thrusting up towards her center while they were both fully clothed. Apparently they were incredibly sensitive. Jane grinned evilly before gliding her fingers along his wings in the same manner as she would while teasing his dick. His tortured groan was all the reward she needed to continue.

Unable to be patient thanks to her ministrations, he propped her ass on a cleared section of the table. He softly kissed the pulse point on her neck before guiding her shoulders gently down until she was laid out in front of him on her back. He managed to keep one hand on her thigh so that her legs stayed wrapped around his waist and used the other hand to trace the contours of her body. Kiernan pushed the silky top up, inhaling sharply at the sight of her naked breasts pushed up like an offering because of her arched back.

He leaned down, taking one nipple in his mouth and sucking gently. He was learning the pressure she enjoyed most. When he sucked harder and gave a gentle bite, she couldn't contain the loud moan that escaped.

“You like it a little rough? Fuck, Jane,” he groaned as he switched breasts. After licking a swirl around her other nipple, he bit down hard enough to force another moan. His deep,

satisfied chuckle made her pussy clench and her legs tighten around his waist.

He pinched one nipple as his other hand reached between her legs. He used four fingers to rub the silk pants against her center, pushing the lace of her panties inside of her.

“That’s it, sweetheart, I can feel your wetness seeping all the way into this silk. But that’s not what I want. I want you to drench my fingers, Jane.”

Kiernan unwound her legs from his waist before he pulled down her panties and pants in one slick move, letting them fall to the floor. He pushed two fingers into her pussy and groaned at how wet she was before twisting his hand so that his thumb could roll over her clit.

Jane sucked in a sharp breath as her pussy clenched hard on his fingers, another slick rush of arousal dripping down over his hand.

“That’s my girl, such a good girl. More, Jane.”

He leaned down and bit more firmly on her nipple, laving the sting away with his tongue. She squirmed against his fingers, getting closer and closer to a climax.

How did he know? In her lust-filled haze, Jane couldn’t stop herself from wondering how he knew every spot to hit. Those glamour robot things that each man got, were they teaching aids, too? Because no one had ever touched Jane with this much intensity. He moved faster, pushing his thumb across her clit over and over again. He thrust his fingers deeper, making that come-hither motion in just the right spot.

Kiernan must have known she was getting close, because he reached his other hand up and cupped her cheek, rubbing his thumb gently across the apple of her cheek in an intimate gesture that made her flush. He was looking at her like she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. No one had ever looked at Jane like that or treated Jane like she was precious with gentle touches on her face. Thinking about his thumb on her cheek reminded her where his other thumb was, circling

over her clit again. She moaned as his fingers continued in all the right places.

She felt her entire body clench as her orgasm came, until it was just her pussy clenching and releasing.

“So beautiful, Jane,” he whispered in her ear. He slowed his fingers to match the timing of her pulsing, prolonging the pleasure until her body couldn’t take anymore.

“Oh, Kiernan, yes,” she moaned, closing her eyes as she tilted her head back with the aftershocks.

“My good girl, drenching my fingers just like I asked.”

He lifted his hand from her dripping pussy and waited until she locked her eyes on his as he licked her climax from his fingers, making a low mmmm sound as he did. She sucked in a breath. Her pussy clenched again, this time around nothing, making her whimper.

The reasoning part of her brain kept telling her to slow down. Things were moving so quickly and Jane was doing everything she could just to tread water in this entirely new world with no life raft. She was aware that she’d only known Kiernan a few days, but she wanted to make him feel just as good as she did. Wasn’t she entitled to turn off her brain and succumb to pleasure just for a moment? She’d been matched with this man, after all. He was her... fairy boyfriend or whatever, right? Jane told her inner voice of reason to shut up because she was going to enjoy this moment with the sexiest man she’d ever seen that wanted her just as badly as she wanted him.

She reached down and slid his pants down his body. There was nothing underneath and she sucked in a sharp gasp as his erection sprang free. He was huge and hard. So hard for her. His eyes never lost their focus on hers, though, watching her as she stared down at him. She could tell by the stiffness in his arms that he was holding himself back from stopping her playtime. It was a struggle for him not to move, but the heat in his eyes let her know he loved it. She wanted him to keep looking at her like he’d never seen anything so hot. She wanted him not to be able to stop himself from touching her.

She let one of her hands slide down her body and rubbed her own wetness. She watched the hungry look in Kiernan's eyes as she slid her fingers around her sensitive clit and fully coated her fingers in her climax.

She knew that having both hands reaching down towards him like this would push her breasts together like an offering. Kiernan couldn't take his eyes off of her chest, licking his lips at her puckered nipples.

Before he had the chance to lean towards her and suck one into his mouth again and derailing her plan entirely, she clasped his dick with her hand and spread her wetness all over him. Jane inhaled sharply when she realized she couldn't remotely close her fingers around his cock. Jane had a brief moment of worry that he wouldn't fit inside of her or that it might seriously hurt. But looking up at Kiernan, she knew he would do anything in his power to make it good for her. That's all he'd been doing this whole time, after all, making it so good for her.

She pulled her hand up and down in long, twisting strokes, spreading her climax along his cock to use in her ministrations. When her eyes flicked up to his, she saw he wasn't looking at her chest anymore. His eyes were glued to her hand on his cock, quickening her pace as she gripped the silky skin. He groaned and it spurred Jane on to move just a little faster, a little harder. He'd noticed that she liked it rough. Did he?

She tightened her grip with a twist as she got to the head, rubbing her thumb sensually along the sensitive spot under the head. She found a thick drop of precum as she paid special attention to the tip. Her tongue poked out of her mouth and ran along her lower lip.

"Taste me," Kiernan growled, eyes glued to her tongue.
"Taste what you do to me, Jane."

She lifted her hand and licked the precum off her thumb, the slightly tangy taste of herself mixing with his on her fingertip and making her moan.

“You look so sexy licking me up,” he groaned, eyes hooded with desire.

She started to move her hand faster and his breathing picked up. She watched his chest rise and fall with his heavier breathing. Jane felt herself growing wet all over again, excited at the control she wielded. This was Prince Kiernan of the Summer Court, and he was putty in her hands. She felt powerful. She kept up the pace, gripping hard on each downstroke. She reached down with her other hand and palmed his balls. His eyes met hers, widening slightly when he watched her lick her lips. She wanted him to lose control. When she tugged them gently in her palm, Kiernan threw his head back and stiffened even further in her hand.

He groaned, loud and long, almost grunting with each pulse of his climax. He shot the milky ropes across her bare stomach. When he looked down and saw what he'd done, his hips thrust uncontrollably a few times as his eyes darkened.

“Fuck, you look amazing like that, covered in me,” he said with gravelly desire in his voice. He reached down and ran a finger through one of the ropes, smearing it into her skin. “Fuck, yes, Jane.”

Kiernan leaned down and took her lips with his, claiming her with a firm kiss. When he pulled back, he brushed the back of one hand along her cheek, making Jane melt into the touch. He kissed her again before pulling himself slowly out of her.

He went to the bathroom and she wondered if he had left to clean himself up, but then he came back moments later with a warm, wet cloth. When she reached for it gratefully, he pulled it back and started to clean her himself, gently and carefully.

Jane tried to think back, but couldn't find a single occurrence of ever feeling so cared for. She didn't expect it from Kiernan and she wished it would never end.

Instead, Kiernan helped Jane off the table. Jane reached down and picked up her panties and pants, but paused before pulling them on.

That was so fucking hot. Better by far than the last time she'd had sex. And they hadn't even actually had sex. But what they had done, damn. Thinking about Kiernan rubbing her panties into her made her realize she should probably just put on new clothes. Maybe shower. It had been a long, stressful day.

“I think I'm going to take a shower.”

“Oh. Alright,” Kiernan said with a stiff nod. “Is there anything you need?”

“I imagine it's all there, but I'll let you know if I'm missing anything.”

Jane turned to give him another kiss, but his back was to her and he was already walking away.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JANE SHOWERED AND put on fresh clothes, including one of her new nightgowns. This one was sapphire blue stretchy fabric with black trim and was short with a tiny slit that made it seem even shorter. The thicker straps were black lace and framed the lace v-neck. She put on tiny black panties underneath before walking barefoot out to see Kiernan.

She was hoping he might cuddle with her now that she'd washed off the day, but she realized that wasn't going to happen when she couldn't find him. She thought the suite was empty of people until she thought to check the bedroom he'd indicated was his.

The door was shut.

She knew it was open earlier, so he must have gone in and shut it. Jane frowned. When she'd showered, she'd left the door to her room open. Why would he shut his? Was this his way of literally showing that he was metaphorically shutting her out or was she reading way too much into things?

Jane didn't like the idea that they would have this amazing sexual experience, better than any sex she'd had in her life, and then he'd lock himself away and leave her alone. It made her feel cheap and used.

Should she knock on his door? Jane was a confident woman. She should knock on his door and tell him she wanted to sleep together. It had been in her initial 10 questions, so she knew he was open to sleeping in the same bed for the night. So why had he closed the door?

Jane padded silently back to her own room and looked at her door. Should she close hers, too? Jane decided to leave hers open. Maybe he was handling some royal responsibilities

that were confidential. Her open door would let him know that he could come in if he wanted.

Jane crawled into bed. It wasn't quite bed time, but it had been such a long day. Jane knew part of it was The Questioning being over. All the anticipation and anxiety she'd felt through the experience was fading out of her, leaving her feeling worn out.

She closed her eyes for just a moment and when they opened, the sun was shining brightly through her bedroom window, signaling the morning had arrived.

Jane got dressed, took care of her morning routine, and peeked her head into Kiernan's open door. She took in his room, unsurprised to see the grey walls, dark wood furniture, and minimal decor. The door to his ensuite was open with no light shining from within. Seeing the room empty, she headed towards the kitchen. She wondered about breakfast. How did Kiernan know whether or not the family would meet for breakfast or if he was on his own?

When she got to the main living rooms, she saw on the table what looked like a champagne bucket with a note propped on it. Pulling out the bottle nestled in the icy container, she thought she recognized the violet kiseo juice. She picked up the note when she noticed her name.

Jane, I made sure you had kiseo juice to start your day. Perhaps we could have breakfast together. I am having it delivered at 8 a.m. Please do not feel the need to wait for me if you would like to dine sooner. -Kiernan

Jane managed to find glasses and poured herself some kiseo juice while she wondered at the time. She would need to ask Kiernan about getting herself a crystal. If they worked for her. Maybe they only worked for the fairies.

She took her glass of juice and wandered around, her curiosity pushing her to investigate her surroundings further. She was living here, too, so there was no reason not to have a look around. She assumed, especially after last night, that Kiernan might be interested in something long term. Long term relationships shouldn't have secrets, right?

Jane soon found that the only surprise was the fact that there was nothing surprising in the entire place. Not in the living room, the bathroom cabinets, the guest rooms, and not in Kiernan's room, either. She didn't even find one of those sex dolls.

Did Kiernan have another home? How could he live somewhere so impersonal? Sure, she found some books that had clearly been read by the dog-eared pages that drove her crazy, but she didn't see work out equipment, either. He said he enjoyed working out. Surely someone that enjoyed working out would have something he could do in his own rooms.

Jane was wandering back towards the living room when the entry door opened. Kiernan walked in and smiled softly when he saw her walking his way.

“Good morning,” he said, kissing her on the top of her head, leaving her slightly confused. Was that gesture romantic and sweet? Or more of a friendly kiss?

“Good morning, Kiernan,” she returned, confused. “Thank you for the juice.”

“Of course. It is my honor to make your stay here comfortable and enjoyable.”

He sounded formal and like he was Stoic Kiernan again. Fuck, she had to do something. She didn't want Mr. Hyde today. She wanted to keep getting to know Sweet Kiernan. She thought about their naked time together last night. Dominating Kiernan would be an acceptable alternative, though.

Thinking about Dominating Kiernan and all they did together made her feel a little brave, so she went with a cheeky response.

“Absolutely,” she purred. “I hope you know that last night was *exceedingly* enjoyable for me.”

She winked at him just as there was a knock at the door. Kiernan remained silent, mouth slightly parted in surprise at her unexpected cheekiness, as he went to open the door. Their breakfast had arrived. The butler— was it a butler? She would need to learn the job titles so she wasn't offending anyone—

brought in the breakfast and set up the table without being asked. He slipped back out just as silently once finished.

She sat when Kiernan did and loaded her plate. She needed to start the conversation, but wasn't sure what to say, so she said the first thing that came into her mind.

“Are there certain days you have breakfast as a family? How do you know where to eat breakfast?”

Kiernan smiled at her.

“Breakfast is always available buffet-style in the informal dining room. Most of the family dines there, but I thought you'd prefer this. Was I wrong?”

She thought about it, tilting her head as she weighed her words.

“You're not wrong. I want this time just for us because I want to get to know you better, but I like your family. Eating with them wouldn't be a hardship, either. I don't want you to change your whole life for me. I know you've got royal responsibilities and I don't want you to feel like you have to drop those because I'm here.”

Kiernan looked at her with his brow furrowed and mouth twisted to one side.

“What's on your schedule today?” Jane asked when he didn't speak.

“I have one meeting this morning that couldn't be pushed,” he answered with a shrug. “Otherwise, I've cleared my day.”

“I don't want you to do that. If you can clear some time each day, that would be great, but I'll also understand if you can't. The work you do... it can't wait. What would you be doing today if you hadn't been chosen?”

Kiernan stiffened in his chair, eyes widening for a fraction of a second.

“That's not important. Your comfort and enjoyment are what I need to focus on.”

Jane couldn't understand what he was saying. It sounded like he was reading a script. Was this how females were treated here? Once chosen, the man was just a slave to his woman while they were together? Who could she even ask about this? She could probably ask the queen, but if this was part of their culture, she worried about offending her.

She wanted to get to know the man he truly was, not the man he was forcing himself to be for her. Not to mention that this wasn't sustainable. You couldn't force yourself to be someone else forever.

Forever. Did Jane want forever with Kiernan? She didn't know. Sometimes, when Sweet Kiernan was around, she could see a possible forever for the two of them. She could consider leaving her old world behind even if they could find and open the portal that brought her here. There really wasn't much she was leaving anyway. Truly, the more she contemplated it, the more she wondered if she wanted to go home at all. She already had some amazing friends here and thought they'd only grow closer with time. She could be happy here.

But if Kiernan wouldn't open himself up and take the chance with her, she wouldn't want to stay with him. So if they *could* get the portal to her home open, would she want to stay anyway? To stay, would she go through another Questioning?

So many possibilities. Jane's thoughts went around in circles. She'd always worried endlessly in her own head over the things she couldn't control, but knew this set of circumstances took the cake. She had no control over any of this. Thinking about the different possibilities was probably a waste when she had so little control. They'd open up the portal or they wouldn't. Kiernan would open up or he wouldn't. All she could do was try to be supportive and open herself.

Jane realized she'd sat silently through the entirety of breakfast. And Kiernan had let her. She opened her mouth to apologize or start a new conversation, something, but he was standing already, walking away.

“Where are you going? Can I come?”

He flinched. Noticeably flinched.

“I am on my way to what should be a fairly quick meeting, Jane, and I do not think it is a good idea for you to accompany me. I apologize.”

“Oh, okay,” Jane tried to sound fine with being shut down. “I might go speak with your parents, then, and see if there’s been any progress on the portal back to the human realm.”

Kiernan turned back to her quickly, looking as though he’d been punched in the stomach.

“I did not think you would enjoy my meeting, Jane,” he said, swallowing hard, “but if you would prefer to accompany me, I can make the arrangements.”

What? Did he not want her to talk to his parents? Why not?

“That’s okay. I like the idea of seeing your mother. I had a good time with her.”

Kiernan’s face squished up until it looked as though he’d sucked on a sour lemon before it relaxed completely and his face turned expressionless.

“Whatever you think is best, Jane,” he said formally, nodding before walking away, leaving her alone in his rooms.

She still didn’t have a crystal or any way to tell time or contact anyone. She vowed to make that a priority during her next conversation with Kiernan. And when would that be? They didn’t make any plans for lunch or dinner. Her stomach twisted with anxiety. This all felt off and she hated it.

She decided to try her luck in the informal dining room and see if anyone was still there. She made a few wrong turns getting through this wing of the castle for the first time, but finally found familiar walkways and eventually, the room she sought.

She breathed out a sigh of relief when King Cormac and Queen Melody were there.

They both smiled to her as she walked in and she felt herself relax slightly. She sat down in the seat she’d used a few

times, not worrying about the other empty seats.

“Can I ask you both a question, please?”

“Of course,” King Cormac replied easily, before continuing in a teasing manner. “We may not answer though.”

“I just wondered if there had been any progress on the portal to the human realm?”

The queen sucked in a breath with a wince. Why? Jane didn't understand.

“Has something gone wrong? Did you find out it can't be opened again at all?”

Jane's voice cracked on that last question. Sure, she'd been contemplating staying here, but to have her choice taken away was painful.

“No, Jane,” Melody replied. “I am just surprised you are here asking about the portal instead of spending some time with Kiernan. I know he was attempting to clear his schedule earlier. I worry that things might not be going well.”

Is this how Kiernan had felt when she asked? Is that why he looked like he'd been kicked? Did he think she was passive-aggressively hinting that she wanted to go home? Shit, *was* she passive-aggressively hinting that she wanted to go home? She didn't think so.

Jane hoped she wasn't that kind of person. She liked knowing all of her options, though, and open-ended possibilities made her more nervous. That wasn't crazy, was it?

“He said that he had a meeting. And that it would be best if I didn't accompany him.”

“Idiot child,” Melody mumbled loud enough for Jane to hear.

The king spoke next.

“I sent ten males strong in portal magic with Roarke the day after your arrival. I get daily reports, but so far they have

not had success in locating or opening the portal that brought you here. I am sorry, Jane.”

“I appreciate the update,” Jane said, worried and trying not to show it. She decided to tackle something different. “I also wanted to ask if crystals were only for the fae? I thought it might be nice to have a way to tell the time and to communicate with you both or any of my new friends.”

“As long as someone activates the crystal with their magic, you’d be able to use it. It is fairly simple magic for us, so most could assist.” The queen nodded as she spoke. “Having a crystal is smart. I’ll see to it this afternoon.”

Jane smiled, feeling relief. She didn’t want to mess up Kiernan’s life and she didn’t want to be completely reliant on him. Jane was used to relying on herself. The world might be different here, but she could still make her own place in it if she had the right tools, with or without magic of her own.

After King Cormac and Queen Melody left the dining room, Jane wandered the castle for a while, finally ending up back in Kiernan’s quarters. She was able to walk right in and wondered if she was supposed to lock the door or something. She worried she’d left his private quarters unlocked and open for others to walk through. When she inspected the door handle, she saw no lock.

Then she put the pieces together. She’d passed multiple guards along the hallways, including four that stood on either side of the entry to the family wing of the castle. Perhaps the royal family felt locks weren’t necessary because of the guards.

When Kiernan came into the room later, it was the first thing she asked, even before he’d shut the door behind him.

“Why don’t your doors lock?”

“What?” Kiernan looked thrown for a loop. And also tired. He looked so tired. Jane frowned.

“When I came back to your room after wandering the castle, your door wasn’t locked. Is it because of the guards?”

“We lock our doors with our own magic, Jane,” he replied. “I did lock mine today. We’re able to tell our magic who is permitted inside.”

“What? How does it know who I am?”

Kiernan tilted his head to one side, considering her question.

“You know, I’m honestly not sure. I was able to add you to the door, though, just like anyone else. I’m not sure how it all works, but since you were able to get back in without assistance, clearly it did work.”

Kieran invited her for a lunch picnic in the royal gardens, which she happily accepted. Walking towards the garden together, he even held her hand, clasping their fingers like yesterday.

Jane’s cheeks flushed with warmth. Perhaps his meeting today had been really stressful. With it over, he was ready to open up.

Over lunch, they talked about fashions in Fairie and the human realm. How they were different and how they were the same. Sweet Kiernan was engaged in their conversation and it was nice to have him so attentive. He touched her more than once while they were talking, little touches that made her feel attractive and noticed. This was what she wanted. This feeling.

When they were interrupted by the queen, Jane was smiling widely and so was Kiernan. It made the queen smile to see.

“I know you’re not able to use magic, so you can’t do a glamour,” the queen said when she stood in front of them.

“I don’t even know what a glamour really is, other than a se... um, never mind, can you explain a glamour, please?”

“It’s when you can magically change the appearance of anything or anyone. You could change your eye color to pink. Or make yourself look like Kiernan, although glamouring yourself to look like royalty is against our laws. Or you can make something like your crystal disappear or look like jewelry.”

She handed Jane a small crystal on what looked like a beautiful chain lanyard.

“Most of us attach our crystals to us with a glamour or keep them in pockets, but I thought this might suit you since you’re not able to glamour it.”

Jane was thrilled.

Kiernan was not.

“I would have gotten her a crystal, Mother,” he said roughly before turning to Jane in frustration. His shoulders dropped down as he tucked his chin towards his chest. Jane couldn’t tell whether he was angry or just upset, but his words were loud and harsh. “Why didn’t you ask me? I will always make sure you have whatever you need. You should have come to me.”

Jane was stunned into silence, surprised at how his personality switched *again*.

“I didn’t remember to ask you this morning,” she said quietly. She would normally never let anyone talk to her in such a demanding tone, but the flipping between Sweet Kiernan and Stoic Kiernan was leaving her feeling unsettled. She couldn’t get her footing. She didn’t know this world and honestly, he seemed to be making it harder instead of easier.

Jane’s anger grew the more she thought about the last 24 hours.

“Not that you gave me much opportunity to discuss it. You didn’t ask if I needed one. Maybe you should have asked.”

“I don’t think you do need one,” he immediately responded with a stubborn set to his chin. “I can take care of anything you need.”

“I don’t need you to take care of me,” Jane said, voice low with anger. “I take care of myself. Always.”

The queen laughed an uncomfortable, awkward laugh, attempting to break through the thick cloud of anger in the air.

“Well, you have one now, Jane,” she said, trampling over the both of them as if the angry words had never been spoken.

“I hoped you might use it so that we could set up some time to spend together. Perhaps do some more shopping. I so enjoyed that day.”

Kiernan leaned heavily back into his chair, mouth set mulishly as he dropped his eyes to the table.

“I’d like that very much,” she said honestly to the queen before deciding to extend an olive branch. She didn’t know what was going on, but she needed Kiernan to meet her in the middle. “I’m hoping Kiernan can take some time this afternoon to show me how it works.”

He looked up at her, the anger in his eyes receding slightly to make room for hope.

“Of course I will,” he responded. “Whatever you need.”

Well, she wanted him to give her the benefit of the doubt and not rush to anger or upset. She needed him to open up and let her in.

She needed him to try and share his life with her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“THANK YOU, MOTHER,” Kiernan said to his mom as she left the garden. “Yes, I can show you how a crystal works, Jane.”

He held out a hand for the crystal and pulled her chair close to his. There were still a few inches between their legs, so it wasn't as close as last night. Jane felt slightly disappointed with the extra space between them. Jane put the crystal in Kiernan's hand.

“It's best to think of the crystals here as a blank piece of paper. Anyone with a writing utensil can draw on it, right? But most of the time, a drawing by a child won't be nearly as intricate as what an adult can do. And once drawn, even those without writing utensils can enjoy the beauty of the drawing.”

“You're saying anyone with magic can work with a crystal...”

“Exactly, crystals like these are how most start to learn their magic.”

“But adults can do it better?”

“Yes and no. Adults can do more. So instead of just being able to tell time, a crystal made by an adult will have an alarm feature, for example. Or might be set up to give you a reminder at certain times.”

“I see, so it's like ‘there's an app for that.’”

“I don't know what you're saying now.”

“Crap. Of course you don't. But I do understand what you're saying. And you're also saying that your mom used her magic to make my crystal and because it's already made, I can use it, too.”

“Yes, exactly. Because of my own magic, I could add to what she’s done or make changes. You don’t have the right tools— magic— to do that. But when she created your crystal, she made it with you in mind. Most crystals show the time while they’re at rest. Yours has different spots you can tap to use the different functions since you wouldn’t be able to use your magic on it.”

He turned the crystal so I could see it and pointed out the different buttons. They weren’t physical buttons. The thing looked like an iPhone so it was pictures of buttons. It was bizarre how much it looked like an iPhone. She would just need to learn all of the ‘apps’. He showed Jane which one would send messages, how to connect to another crystal for voice chat, and another button for a video call. The queen had also given her what was basically a notes app, a schedule app, and a shopping app.

Cool.

“Last thing is this side button.” He flipped the crystal to the side and I saw a small picture of a button. “If you tap this one, your crystal will...”

The crystal shrank. It just started to get smaller and smaller from a hand-sized iPhone on a lanyard down to what looked like a 2” flat oval diamond on an elegant long chain. It was gorgeous.

Kiernan lifted the long chain over her head before showing her a tiny actual physical button on the crystal’s bottom. When he pushed it, it grew to hand-sized again with a lanyard.

“You can keep the chain on while you use it, see. It’s enchanted to adjust with the crystal’s use.”

“That’s amazing,” she breathed. How cool. Jane tapped around on it, but it was so similar to what she was used to, with symbols on all of the buttons to help her navigate, that she didn’t think she would have any issues.

She grinned over at Kiernan, excited to have a way to get around while he was busy.

“Thanks for helping me learn this,” she said.

“Anything you need, Jane, you just have to let me know.”

“I will. I can’t apologize for asking your mother when I would have asked you if I’d remembered. I wasn’t deliberately keeping something from you, Kiernan.”

“I am sorry if I misunderstood the situation. I worry that I am not giving you what you need.”

“Let’s just move on, then,” Jane said. She was frustrated, though. His apology was for misunderstanding the situation? How about for nearly yelling at her in anger? She didn’t appreciate that he spoke to her that way and felt like the apology should have been for that instead of for misunderstanding the situation.

At least he apologized? Jane shrugged mentally. Maybe she was being too sensitive.

“I thought, if you were interested, that I might show you around Fairie this afternoon. We could have dinner at one of the restaurants. What do you think?”

“That sounds wonderful! Yes, let’s do that.”

Kiernan stood and held out his hand for hers, once again clasping their hands tightly when she acquiesced. They walked through the castle, Kiernan nodding at guards and other fairies as they passed. She was surprised at how many acknowledged her, as well as Kiernan. She wondered if they’d all watched her Questioning and recognized her from that.

When they got out of the castle onto a hedge-lined stone path, Jane wondered if they’d be walking around Fairie. How much could they really see in an afternoon if they had to walk everywhere? Or were they using in-world portals or something?

The change in smell clued her in to their destination before they turned out of the hedges to see a stable. She smelled the leather and animal sweat, bringing back memories of a day spent riding with her family when she was very little. She smiled softly at the almost-forgotten memory.

Her mother had taken them on a trail ride that day. They’d all had their own horse and had stopped for a picnic lunch with

a whole group of other people. They'd laughed all day, but especially when the ride was done. She remembered her mother rubbing her bottom and grumbling exaggeratedly about how she was a city girl and not used to thumping along on her butt. Tears wanted to come to Jane's eyes, but she shook her head out of the memory when she noticed Kiernan watching her curiously.

"Are we riding horses?"

Kiernan shook his head before answering.

"The carriage house is behind the stable."

"We're going on a carriage ride?"

"That's how we get around unless riding or flying."

"Flying."

"Yes."

Jane felt like an idiot of epic proportions. They had wings. Of course they could fly.

"Tell me everything!"

"About flying?"

"Yes about flying! Can you fly as soon as you're born? Are babies born with wings? Can you carry someone else?"

Kiernan chuckled at her enthusiasm.

"Babies are born with wings, yes. Most learn to fly during puberty. It's a slow learning curve that starts mostly with gliding. Not everyone can carry someone. You train your wings like any other muscle. Stronger wings are needed to carry someone. I could definitely carry tiny, slim you, though."

"That's amazing. I wish I had wings."

"Jane, you're beautiful just as you are. No wings needed."

"Thank you," Jane said as she blushed.

"Anyway, I thought this would be most comfortable," he said, "while still allowing us to see a mix of what Fairie can offer. I didn't think you would enjoy being carried the whole time or riding if you're not used to it."

“No, this is great, really,” she answered. She couldn’t believe he would carry her around, though. Did fairies that could carry others do that often? How did his shiny wings support his enormous body? She was eyeing him up and down, wondering about the mechanics of flight, when she heard a low growl.

She looked up and saw how intensely he was looking at her. Her tummy did a little flip and she clenched her thighs tight involuntarily.

“If you keep staring at me, I’ll take you back to our rooms instead of on a carriage ride.”

Jane thought that was a grand idea. She took a step into him, unclasping her hand from his so she could place both of her palms on his chest.

He leaned down and captured her lips in a slow kiss. He paused and looked in her eyes.

“I wanted to show you Fairie, take you out and let you see this world, but now I just want you spread naked underneath me. Tell me what to do, Jane.”

She wanted him. She *so* wanted him, but he was finally opening up and sharing more of himself. She didn’t want to slow that progress.

“Is getting naked later an option? I want you, Kiernan, but I want to know what you were going to show me.”

He took a deep breath and gave her a gentle kiss on the lips before taking a step back.

“I’m glad you want to see Fairie,” he said with a small smile. “I want you to fall in love with this world and with... uh, the food.”

She looked at him for a moment, sure he’d been about to say something else, but they arrived at the carriage house and that stole her attention. At the entrance of the barn-like structure, there was an open area with stalls lined on either side that housed various carriages. In the center, though, there was an open-top carriage with two absolutely beautiful horses attached.

One of the horses was light blue with all different shades of dark blue for the mane and tail. The other was a dreamy pastel pink with a brightly-colored rainbow mane and tail. The carriage was silver. It looked as though it came straight out of a fairy tale.

“Can I...” Jane started to ask as she inched closer to the pink horse.

“Yes, but first let me connect,” Kiernan responded. She didn’t understand what he meant, but she almost fell over when both horses sprouted a glittery horn on their heads.

“Oh my God, they’re *unicorns*,” she said in a hushed whisper before blurting out her thoughts. “Well, of course you have unicorns. You’re all fairies and magic. Why wouldn’t there be unicorns? But when you said no dragons, I thought that meant no unicorns, too. This is amazing. Can I pet one now?”

Kiernan looked at her in surprise, eyes wide and mouth slightly open.

“I’ve always wanted to see a unicorn,” she said honestly, a little slower. He smiled softly at her.

“They are just horses,” he replied. “There are no unicorns like you are imagining. There is advanced magic that allows us to connect with them telepathically. Unfortunately, there is no other telepathy in our world. It can only be done with horses and not everyone can do it, but yes, when we connect, they do end up looking like unicorns.”

“Like an antenna. Weird. But they are so, so beautiful. Can I pet one now, please?”

Kiernan paused for a moment, looking as though he was thinking very hard about something.

“I have connected to both and asked. They are both amenable to meeting you. Would you like to know their names?”

“Of course!”

Jane was so excited she was practically vibrating with it, staring in awe at the gorgeous creatures. She didn't care if they were horses or unicorns. They were gorgeous and had glitter horns. That was close enough.

“The one in shades of blue is Dawn To Dusk and he says you can call him Dusk. The pink one you keep edging closer to is Blushing Prism. You can call her Blush.”

She stopped and turned in surprise when Kiernan snorted.

“What?”

“Blush said she appreciated how you recognized her superior colors and showed the proper respect for her beauty and grace. I fly more frequently than I ride, Jane, and I had honestly forgotten how *majestic* the horses in Fairie can be.”

He said majestic like she would say the word shit. Jane giggled, knowing he'd basically called the horses conceited. Jane thought they had every right to feel that way.

“That's right, Blush, of course you are,” she cooed. “You know exactly how beautiful you are, don't you?”

“They are highly intelligent, so you may not want to talk to them like children,” Kiernan said with a wince. “But Blush accepts the compliment anyway.” He rolled his eyes at her when the horses weren't looking.

Jane gave a neck rub to Dusk before speaking to them both.

“Thank you for agreeing to show me around Fairie. I'm honored.”

Both horses nodded at her. It was trippy and amazing at the same time. Kiernan helped her into the carriage and off they went on a sightseeing tour of Fairie.

They spent hours together, looking at everything. They saw plants of all different shapes, colors, and sizes. Her favorite plant looked like a flower within a flower. It was called a Peek-A-Boo because the plum petals of what looked like a rose opened up when you were near as if showing off

that hiding within was a carnation in multiple purple hues. It smelled a lot like soothing lavender.

It was odd trying to put a different world in perspective using the terms from the human realm. It wasn't the same, but it was also just similar enough that she could draw comparisons to fit things inside her mind without feeling overloaded or crazy.

Jane's favorite place that they saw was a small, ice-blue waterfall that fell into a light blue pool surrounded by overgrown plants and trees in varying vivid shades of lime, lavender, and rust. The pool was still and clear enough to see the ground through the water. It smelled like gardenias and sunshine, and was so peaceful that it almost made her sleepy. It reminded Jane of the grotto in *The Little Mermaid*, when all the animals sang about them kissing for the first time. It was magical just like that moment in the movie.

She talked with Kiernan about random nothingness. He told her stories of the books he'd enjoyed and she told him stories, too. He was particularly interested in the Harry Potter books, but she enjoyed telling him about Peter Pan more than anything else. When she told him all about Tinker Bell and how fairies were born of a human baby's first laugh, he looked at her like she was insane, making her burst into laughter. They laughed a lot. Their time together was easy and relaxing and Jane wished the day would never end.

But then it was time for dinner. Jane didn't want to leave the beauty of nature, but her stomach was starting to protest so she didn't complain. Kiernan took her to a small restaurant that looked surprisingly similar to restaurants she'd seen in New York, just without all of the surrounding buildings. The restaurant had tall windows and you could see tables scattered throughout the inside.

She was almost disappointed. So much was different between the two realms. She had been looking forward to another new experience with their dinner, and instead it was like she was walking into any Applebees. When they were seated at a small table for two, Kiernan asked Jane what she'd like to drink.

“Would you like juice, sparkling juice, sparkling water, or a fae wine? There’s one made with kiseo juice if you’re not tired of that yet.”

At her smile and excited nod, he ordered a bottle for the two of them to share.

“We don’t get menus to order food?”

“No, here you can link to their crystal to see their menu each day. That is all they serve. But the food is amazing and they are always quite busy.”

And an hour later, with a full stomach, Jane agreed wholeheartedly. The food was amazing and so was fae wine. She giggled. She thought it might be stronger than booze from home.

Kiernan smiled at her as he helped her get back into the carriage and he snuck a kiss as he sat beside her. Jane’s cheeks felt flushed and she couldn’t decide if it was from alcohol or the company.

“Are you busy tomorrow?” Jane asked. Kiernan was quiet beside her.

“I have some items on the agenda that could not be moved.”

“That’s okay. I can entertain myself or set up some time for shopping with your mother if she’s free. What are your meetings about?”

She felt Kiernan stiffen beside her.

“We do not need to discuss my royal responsibilities,” Kiernan said sharply. Jane bristled.

“Are you not allowed to discuss them with me?”

“I am Prince Kiernan Samhradh of the Summer Court. There is no *allowed* or *not allowed*. If I wished to discuss them with you, I would. You need not concern yourself with any of my royal duties. I will handle them while ensuring we have ample time together. Were we to mate, I would still make sure that you had no obligations to the crown.”

Jane felt like she'd been slapped. They'd spent the day together. A wonderful, magical day. But she felt like she finally understood why Kiernan went from hot to cold so quickly. He was trying to keep the part of him that was the prince separate from her.

He didn't think she was good enough to be the princess to his prince and share in his duties to the fae realm.

Jane felt small. And angry that he might have wasted her chance at a soulmate since he clearly didn't want to be hers. She wished they were back in the suite already and that she could hide in her room. She didn't want to talk anymore with Kiernan. Why did he bother participating in her Questioning if he didn't think she'd be suitable as his royal mate?

What if... fairies could have more than one mate? She'd never asked. Could Kiernan have multiple mates? With the shortage of females, it was a reasonable assumption. Perhaps he wanted Jane as his mistress while he spent royal time with his real mate. But that wouldn't match up with her initial questions, right? Jane felt so confused.

And she felt like an idiot for thinking this matchmaking game would work. Nothing in her life was ever easy and she shouldn't have even tried this ridiculous idea. She should have stayed in the castle as a guest and offered to help the guys working at the portal so she could find a way home.

"Are you alright, Jane?"

"I'm fine, Kiernan," she responded shortly.

And he nodded, remaining quiet for the rest of their ride, seeming as if nothing was wrong and he didn't have a single worry in his mind.

Must be nice.

When they got back to the carriage house, he helped her down and went to reach for her hand. She didn't allow it. She said goodbye to the horses and whispered she'd come back and visit if they would allow her to see them again. Blush nodded enthusiastically, making Jane smile. She wanted to ask

what Blush was thinking, but didn't want to engage in conversation with Kiernan right now.

Kiernan attempted to reach for hand a second time when she started walking back to the castle, but she dodged again, folding her arms in front of her chest. He frowned, but didn't say anything.

They made it back to their separate rooms, neither of them saying goodnight, and Jane went to bed. She laid in bed that night for a long time, thinking about what she wanted. What she deserved in a partner. Kiernan might be royal, but she was an awesome person, too. She didn't deserve less because he was royal. She didn't like the way he made her feel sometimes, like tonight.

There were times that he made her feel like a million dollars, though. It wasn't only during sexy times, either. She thought they'd connected today until he shut down.

She wanted to put in all of her effort to make this relationship work and she felt like she'd been trying since she arrived here, but at what point did her trying turn into allowing herself to be a doormat? She tossed and turned that night, sleeping poorly when she slept at all.

When she got up the next morning, she'd come to a decision. If Kiernan couldn't handle treating her as a full partner, allowing her to share in his life, then she had to accept that and move on.

It was time for Jane to worry more about the portal home than being a mate to Kiernan.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AFTER JANE HAD gotten up the next morning, she decided to reach out to Roarke. She used her crystal for the first time, feeling like a kid on Christmas with a new toy. She had no problems finding the right buttons and sending Roarke what basically amounted to a text message. She was pleased to see him respond almost immediately that he was having breakfast in the informal dining room and she could come meet him there if she was okay talking in front of his parents.

Done and done.

Jane got dressed and headed that way without seeing Kiernan. Roarke greeted her with a smile when he saw her. She greeted the king and queen and nodded at Roarke. She was surprised how much she'd missed him, missed her new friends. She realized that in many ways, this world was starting to feel like home. She knew it was crazy to feel like that already, but she couldn't help it. She already had more here than in New York City.

She smiled back at her friend before filling a plate from the buffet and sitting beside him.

“What did you need, Jane? How are things going now that your Questioning is over?”

The king and queen were talking quietly amongst themselves, not paying any attention to Jane and Roarke, so she answered honestly.

“Things are... going. It's an adjustment for sure. But I was hoping you might take me to the place where you found me. Where we met. Whatever you'd call it.”

“Are you hoping for some time alone there? Do I need to see if Father can recall everyone there back to the castle?”

“No, not at all,” she replied. “I don’t mind who else is there. I just feel like I need to see it.”

“Do you mind if Finn, Daire, and Seamus tag along? They have been asking about you. I think the others in the Manly Males have adopted you.”

“The Manly Males?” Jane burst out laughing at his serious face, laughing harder when he wiggled his eyebrows at her in an uncharacteristic move from Roarke. “Is that what you guys call it? Wait, really? You don’t think it’s odd for them to miss me when Daire and Seamus were part of my Questioning?”

“Yeah. We named ourselves as kids. Do not tell me you are a Judgy Jane. But yes, that’s really how it is here. As soon as anyone is eliminated in a Questioning, it kind of closes the door on romance. I’m not sure Daire ever had truly romantic thoughts about you anyway, he keeps himself pretty closed down. Seamus might have held out hope, but like I said, he shut it down when he was eliminated.”

“No, I don’t mind if they come with. Speaking of eliminations, am I allowed to ask Seamus and Daire about the Questioning or is that bad form? I’m curious about people’s answers. Who said what, you know.”

“I can answer that. Seamus told me and I know he would not mind if you asked. You eliminated him on the third question, Jane. The one about what they would do if someone insulted you in public. His answer was to ‘threaten them.’ He said he meant that he would make sure they apologized, but realized he should have said it more clearly. Physical violence isn’t Seamus’ way.”

“I can’t see Seamus getting physical unless absolutely necessary, he’s so sweet.”

“That’s exactly right.”

Jane shrugged it off, trying not to think too much on Seamus’ elimination and what it might have been like if she hadn’t chosen Kiernan. They finished breakfast and walked towards the main entrance of the castle where she’d come in on the first day. She was excited to see Daire, Seamus, and

Finn all waiting there for them. She smiled widely and went over to hug each of them. She hugged Daire first, getting a quick squeeze in response. Seamus gave her a big, encompassing teddy bear hug. The kind you wish for when you're sad. She loved hugs like that and wasn't surprised Sweet Seamus was the one to give hugs like that.

Finn picked her up and hugged her while spinning her around in a circle.

"Janie, Janie, Janie!" He chanted her name repeatedly as he spun her around. "It's been ages and ages since we've seen you. Don't you like us anymore?"

Jane grinned in response. Had they known each other long enough for her to miss him? She didn't know that answer and yet she had missed him, too.

She opened her mouth to tell him so when she was interrupted.

"Where are you going, Jane?"

It was Kiernan and he sounded grumpy. And he was loud. He paced in frustration, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"You can not just.. I need to know where you are at all times. So Jane, are you leaving without telling me?"

Jane's mouth dropped open in shock that at his words. In front of guards and her friends, he was interrogating her like that was acceptable. That was the last straw for Jane. She'd tried to give him grace, tried to understand that this was a different place with different customs. But she had never allowed people to talk to her in anger, accuse her of things like they had that right, or track her whereabouts like something they owned.

Because that's what Kiernan made her feel like. A possession. Something he'd won that he occasionally cared for, but mostly just wanted to control within his own guidelines.

She couldn't tolerate it anymore. He'd run hot and cold, and she felt like she only saw the hot when she was doing what he wanted. He ran cold whenever she stepped out of

whatever boundaries he'd created for without sharing them. Not that she would have accepted any boundaries, but the idea that he held her to them when she didn't understand them only made it worse.

She looked at her friends and looked at Kiernan. Even Roarke looked surprised at his brother's behavior. It was beyond time to handle this.

"Guys, I'm going to talk to Kiernan for a while. Can we schedule this for another time?"

They all nodded, Finn still holding her with one arm around her waist. He squeezed gently before letting her go. She looked at Kiernan and couldn't hide her growing disdain. He flinched back.

"Let's go to our rooms," she said coldly to him. He nodded at the guys and followed her when she breezed past him.

They didn't speak the entire walk back to the royal family wing. At one point, Kiernan reached for her hand, but she yanked it away, glaring at him.

She was so done with his attitude. He couldn't order her to tell him where she was going, like she was some child, and then hold her hand back to their room. This Jekyll-and-Hyde behavior had to end. Or she'd be telling him the sweet dates were done because they couldn't be more than friends. Navigating Kiernan was like walking through a minefield and it was too stressful. And honestly, it was too hurtful.

They made it back to their rooms while Jane was still gathering her thoughts. Once they were inside, she slammed the door and turned to him, ready to have this out and say her piece. She started with a bang.

"Do you regret that I chose you during my Questioning?"

His eyes widened in a way that would have been comical if Jane wasn't feeling so many conflicting emotions already.

"No, Jane," he said, hands held palm-out towards her while he shook his head. "I am grateful to have been chosen."

“That sounds like a line, Kiernan. Half of what you say sounds like a line. You want to see to my comfort and enjoyment. I can’t ask anyone for help but you because you will always make sure I have whatever I need. I need not concern myself with your royal duties. These are all things you’ve said to me and you make me feel... unwanted. Like an obligation you regret...”

“Wait, no, Jane...”

“And then you don’t share anything about what you do as a royal. Your duties and responsibilities. Like I’m not good enough to know royal things because I’m not one of you. Do you think I’m stupid? Or that I can’t understand your important matters? Am I just not trustworthy as a human? Does your father treat your mother as a trusted partner or does he treat her like a moron that cannot handle important man things? What exactly is the issue here? It’s like you don’t want me to know you at all. I...”

“Jane, stop, no...”

“I can’t do this. I can’t navigate how you switch personalities. Kind, warm, caring and then you’ve switched to cold and distant. It’s cruel. You can be cruel. I deserve better. Even if you don’t think so, I deserve better, Kiernan.”

She’d steamrolled over his objections, looking down at her hands while she spit out everything that had been building since she chose him during her Questioning. She sat with a sigh in the closest chair once she slowed down.

Kiernan came close, dropping to his knees in front of her and lifting her chin with one so hand so they were nearly the same height as he looked deeply into her eyes. He started to speak, slowly and firmly in response to her words.

“Jane, I am so sorry that I did not realize what I was doing to you. That you were feeling this way because of my actions. This is the opposite of what I wanted for you, for us.”

“How am I supposed to believe that? Your actions say differently.”

“You are right. I can see that of course you are right, but I did not see how my actions were coming across. I thought... I thought keeping you away from my royal duties was the right thing. I did not want to pressure you. I did not want you to feel like my duties were your obligation. It wasn't about you not being good enough, it was about you not feeling pressured to change your life.”

“What? Change my life? You mean, like how I came to a new world? With new foods, new people, new magic, nothing the same. Oh and wings. People can fly. And you have unicorns. But yeah, no, don't change my life. Don't act as a partner to the person I'm supposed to share my life with.”

Kiernan shook his head, and couldn't meet her eyes, looking down in shame.

“I need to tell you about Brigid.”

“You want to talk about your ex? *Now*? Have you lost your mind?”

“No. I do not *want* to talk about Brigid. I *need* to tell you about her. It will help you understand some of my actions, I hope.”

Jane sat down on the carpet in front of him, encouraging him to sit, as well. He shrugged, looking nothing like his dignified self, and flopped down carelessly in front of her.

“The very first time I participated in a Questioning, I was chosen. The female's name was Brigid. She was lovely and I was excited to be chosen by a female. I had grown up watching my parents, experiencing their love, and assumed being Brigid's choice meant I had found the same.”

Kiernan took a deep breath and Jane reached out to clasp his hand. He looked down at their joined hands and continued.

“It was not the same. Brigid had manipulated the Questioning, deliberately trying to capture me as her chosen. She wanted to be Princess of Summer, Queen eventually, and thought choosing me would be the way to do it.”

“How, Kiernan? How is it possible to manipulate the Questioning?”

Kiernan sighed as he answered.

“Jane, this was the last Questioning before Thomas was brought on board to run the Questionings. Thomas was brought here after the execution of the previous producer. The previous male in charge worked with Brigid. Slipped her notes about how to make it through. It was.. abhorrent. He plotted against the crown and never explained why he was willing to help her. They weren’t related. It still does not make sense why he was willing to take such a risk.”

“I’m sorry, Kiernan, really, but you have to know I didn’t do anything like that.”

“I know. Let me tell you the rest. In some ways, her plan was not a poor one. I let her in completely, opening myself to her and sharing my life. I thought she was learning about the responsibilities she would have as Queen. Instead, she was learning how she could manipulate our people so that she did nothing all day. She wanted to learn how to pass off her own duties without anyone being the wiser. She wanted the title, but not to help anyone. She wanted to lord over people and live a lazy life of luxury, enjoying the perks of our position. When she realized that would not be her life, she left without a second thought.”

“And you thought I was the same?” Jane was shaking her head, unable to believe he’d thought so poorly of her.

“No, Jane,” he immediately responded, clasping her hands tighter within his own. “I never thought that of you. With you, I saw the possibility of a future. I meant it that night before the Questioning, when I said you felt like mine. You did— do— feel like mine. I was terrified that sharing my duties with you would make you run. That you would not want to live a life of constant obligations. A royal’s life revolves around duty and never having the time to enjoy the luxuries everyone else sees for us. I did not want you to run from that life. From me. I wanted to give you time to develop feelings for me.”

“That seems ridiculous. You thought that getting angry with me and walking away after we shared an intimate moment was the way to encourage my feelings?”

He winced.

“The anger was never at you. It was fear and worry. Worry that I was not doing my part. I wanted to be everything that you needed. I still do. If you were asking others for help, then I was failing you. Clearly, I failed anyway by walking away after what we shared. You said you needed to shower and I thought you wanted to get me off of you. Brigid always did that. Showered immediately after intimacy, as though she no longer wanted me near her.”

“Kiernan, I don’t know what to say. This is too much.”

“It is not too much, Jane,” he pleaded for her agreement as he pulled her gently towards him, asking wordlessly for her to move closer. When she did, he tugged her until he had his arms around her in a hug. “I made some mistakes, but I am begging that you do not write us off. I.. I can see my future with you still. I am terrified of messing it up and I went about this incorrectly.”

“I don’t know how to fix this.”

“Just tell me this. If I could open up to you, share my life fully with no reservations, would you be interested in learning more about me and my life?”

Jane sat with his words, still wrapped up in his arms. That was all she wanted, the whole time. But the hot-and-cold would have to stop. She couldn’t keep losing her footing and stumbling around in the dark about where she stood with him.

“Yes,” she whispered, pulling back to sitting and re-clasping their hands. “Yes, I want to know. It’s what I’ve been trying to do and you haven’t let me. But Kiernan, I don’t want to be talked down to like a child. That’s not okay.”

“No, it is not okay. I am so sorry that my fear came out as anger and that you felt mistreated. I swear to use my words more. I will try to believe in this chance we have and not let my doubts take over again. I will tell you anything you want to know, Jane. No secrets.”

“Are you *allowed* to share confidential royal information?”

“With a possible mate? Yes. It is my choice whether to share information or not with a possible mate and Jane, I would choose to tell you every time as long as I knew you genuinely wanted to know. Let me show you I am ready for you. I will not hold back. Please, Jane?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JANE SAT LOOKING into Kiernan's eyes, searching for honesty. She didn't know what to do. She couldn't just keep throwing herself against the wall again and again, thinking it would open a door. But he was saying specifically that he would open the door for her. All she needed to do was agree to walk through it.

Jane sighed, torn. She wanted Kiernan. He must have sensed her weakening, because he rubbed his cheek against hers and kissed her forehead. He pulled her in close, gently guiding her head to his chest, tucked under his chin. He kissed her hair as he ran his hand down her back.

"Please say yes one more time for me, Jane."

"Okay, Kiernan," she whispered as she leaned back, tilting her head up to kiss him softly on the lips.

"Thank you," he kissed her back before pulling her legs around his waist. Their kisses turned feverish quickly as she opened to him, almost as though he knew this was his chance to prove himself and he wanted to start in style. He kept one hand on her jaw, angling her head to his as his tongue thrust in her mouth. He licked her bottom lip as he pulled back, eyes half-closed with lust. "Say yes to this, too, Jane. Do you want me like I want you? I want all of you. Say you want me, too."

"I want you," she whispered as he licked the hollow of her throat.

"Please... say you don't want me to stop this time."

Jane stretched her neck, put her lips close to his ear and whispered her response.

"Don't stop until I've screamed your name."

“Twice,” he growled back. “You’ll scream my name at least twice.”

He slid his hand into the side of her dress so that he could cup her breast, feeling the weight before pinching her nipple.

“More,” she said on a breathy moan, starting to grind her pussy down on his hardening cock. He adjusted himself and then her, so that she was lined up perfectly. He used his hands on her waist to guide her back and forth, repeating the motion until she was mindlessly moaning. She was so close to coming.

With one hand on his shoulders to steady herself, she used the other to tug impatiently at his pants. She wanted his pants off. Now. A cute, dissatisfied grumble came out of her when he shook his head. With a fierce grin, he snapped his teeth in her direction.

“You’re not getting my cock until you’ve already yelled my name once.”

He laid her on the chair beside them, pushing up her skirt and yanking down her panties. He paused for a moment, bestowing a few gentle kisses across her waist. She wiggled, wanting him to move down. She *needed* him to move farther down. He breathed in deeply before throwing his head back on a groan.

“You smell so good.” His words made her shiver and attempt to clench her thighs together. Instead, he spread her legs wide and growled at the sight of her pussy glistening in front of him.

“This is mine now,” he said while sliding in one thick finger. She was too lost in the sensations to form a cohesive response, instead moving her hips to try and ride his finger.

He leaned down and licked a long path up her pussy, leaving his lips around her clit so he could suck it into his mouth. Jane jerked her hips and moaned louder. He nibbled gently on her clit, causing her hips to move uncontrollably, and he used his elbows to lock her legs down into place.

He added a second finger and moved them faster, alternating between sucking and biting softly on her clit. The pressure made her come in minutes, yelling his name in a breathy moan.

“That’s right, good girl. My good girl, are you ready for my cock? Say it for me. Say you want my cock.”

She complied without thought, simply wanting more of him. As much as he could give her.

“Kiernan...” she whispered, “I want your cock, Kiernan.”

He shoved his pants off, his cock so hard that it seemed to bounce against his abs once free. Kiernan gripped himself at the base and squeezed tightly through one long stroke up his length. He groaned when he reached the head and then stroked back down. Jane whimpered as she watched him. He was huge and she could almost feel how he would stretch her. She needed him. Now.

“Please,” she whispered, eyes still locked on the hand teasing himself. He clutched her waist with the other hand, making her feel sexy and feminine with the tight grip.

He notched himself at her opening and looked up to her face. His eyes were a noticeably darker blue than normal and he looked nearly feral as he slid the head of his dick up to rub against her clit. Her breathing hitched and she was ready to beg again when he slid back down.

In one long, firm thrust, he buried himself inside of her. He was big and she felt the stretch, appreciating how he paused long enough to allow her to acclimate to his size. Then he started moving, drawing a low moan out of Jane.

“That’s it, my good girl. You’re taking all of me and it feels so good, doesn’t it?”

She nodded, half out of her head, but she wanted him to call her his good girl again. No one ever had before and she would never have guessed how much she would like it.

He was thrusting more quickly, keeping his strokes deep and firm, when he started to growl each time he was buried fully. His hand on her waist gripped her tighter as he thrust

harder. Jane knew he'd be leaving marks on her fair skin and she loved it.

His tight grip on her made her feel cherished somehow, like he couldn't fathom the idea of her leaving. He kept looking into her eyes, the intensity causing her to simultaneously get hotter for him and feel more connected to him. He was gliding in and out of her on long strokes, biting his lips in concentration. She put her hands on top of his, wordlessly showing him she enjoyed the grip. His hands clenched tighter for just a second in response.

His thrusts gained speed and grew more erratic. Jane was moaning louder now, each growl seeming to vibrate around her whole body and into her center.

Kiernan brought his other hand between them and pinched her clit. Hard. That was all Jane needed to explode.

“Kiernan, yes!” Jane couldn't stop the shout as she came.

Kiernan thrust in one last time, staying buried deep as he roared out his climax.

“Jane!”

They were both breathing heavily, looking into each other's eyes for long minutes. He cupped her cheek and she leaned into his hand while she looked into his eyes. There was sincerity there, a sparkle that seemed to try and tell her this was more than hot sex. Maybe she was seeing what she wanted to see. She wanted it to be more than sex. She wanted him to let her in.

“It has never been like that with anyone before,” he whispered to her once they were both breathing steady, seeming to read her mind. Jane felt like it should feel awkward, but it didn't. They were connected. Literally still, but it was more, too.

“It's never been like that for me before either,” she whispered in response. He peppered her face with kisses, kissing her eyelids, her cheeks, the corner of her mouth, and a few times softly on the lips.

“Good,” he mock-growled. He touched the tip of one finger on her nose, booping her and making her scowl at him. He sent her a slow, sinful smile and kissed her nose.

“Let’s shower together, my Jane,” he whispered as he kissed her forehead and lifted her up, still connected.

He carried her into her shower, turning on the water and stepping inside with her.

“We’re in your shower because of all your beautiful hair. I thought you’d rather have your own potions and products and I don’t care what I use.”

She melted at his thoughtful comment, but even more that he was explaining his actions. That’s what she had wanted all along. Maybe this comedy of miscommunications and errors was at end.

Jane sighed as he set her gently on her feet and turned her around. He pulled her close and kissed her head before leaning her back into the water. She heard the click of a bottle open up before he started lathering her hair.

“You’re going to wash my hair?”

“I’m taking care of you, my Jane, like I should have all along.”

She let him. She let him wash and condition her hair, wash her body in slow strokes that got her hot all over again, and then she returned the favor. She washed and conditioned his hair, amused at the act since his hair was almost down to his shoulders and she’d never dated anyone with hair that long. Not that she’d ever showered with someone else, either. She washed his body, appreciating the defined muscles.

When they finished, he lifted her off her feet again and laid her gently in her bed. She thought he was walking to leave the room, but instead stopped at the other side of the bed and crawled in beside her, tugging until she tumbled into his arms. He tucked her head under his chest and all but purred at having her cuddled up close.

His arms closed around her before readjusting a few times.

“Is this okay?” He was whispering, nervous about his own actions. Her heart melted. She snuggled into him, pulling his arms tighter around herself.

“This is more than okay,” she answered softly. She allowed herself to look back at his actions, taking his past into account. She could see how some of them might have stemmed from fear. His reaction to that fear wasn’t okay, but she hoped it could be different now. That they might actually have a chance.

She decided to try again, giving him her all one last time. She hoped he could let her in— really let her in— this time. She knew it was the only way they’d have a real shot at being together.

She thought about New York. She thought about her job and the people she called her friends. She thought about all that she’d be leaving behind if things worked out with Kiernan. She wanted things to work out with Kiernan, but she was starting to think she really might want to stay either way.

For the first time since she realized Kiernan was her choice, she felt like they had a real foundation to build upon. It wasn’t shaky and unsure, it was solid. Common ground. A better understanding of who they each were and who they wanted to be together. She felt like one half of a team.

She could feel the steady rise and fall of Kiernan’s chest, telling her he’d fallen asleep. She smiled as she drifted off, feeling secure in his arms.

She woke the next morning in the same position. She lifted her head and noticed his eyes were open.

“How long have you been awake?”

“A while now,” he responded with a kiss to the top of her head and a squeeze of his arms. “But you looked so beautiful, so peaceful, that I didn’t want to wake you. I wanted to enjoy you just like this, soft and sleepy and mine.”

Her heart swelled in her chest as she flushed.

“I have never slept with anyone,” he continued, “and I find that I like it very much. I normally wake throughout the night,

the stresses of the day plaguing my sleep. With you, I either did not wake or I went back to sleep without waking enough to remember.”

“You’ve never slept with anyone before?”

“Only you, Jane.”

She felt slightly shy, which was surprising to her after how much of their bodies they’d shared. But she wanted him to know she’d enjoyed them sleeping together. She wanted to meet him halfway.

“I slept really well, too. I liked having you here. I felt protected. Safe.”

“I would protect you from anything, Jane. Perhaps we can sleep together again?”

“Tonight?” She’d like to sleep together again.

“Every night?”

She looked up at him to find him grinning down at her.

“I slept very well, after all,” he said cheekily, earning a smile from her. “Did you need some convincing, my Jane?”

Before she could even think of an answer, he rolled them over, pinning her to the bed with his weight. He used one hand to lift both of hers above her head before he kissed her neck. Her eyes closed at the sensation of his lips against the pulse point on her neck. He moved further down and licked along her collarbone. Her eyes opened on a groan and her attention snagged on his wings.

His beautiful, shimmering, *large* wings. That he’d been sleeping on. With her on top of him.

“Does it hurt?” She blurted the question, so distracted by her thoughts that she forgot he’d just been kissing her. She felt her cheeks get warm. “I’m sorry. I saw your wings and wanted to know if it hurts to lay on them.”

He looked at her with one eyebrow raised before taking in the red of her cheeks. His smile softened.

“Does it hurt to lay on your back?”

“No, but I don’t have anything growing out of my back, Kiernan,” she said sassily after his own playfully snarky question.

“But you lay on your side, occasionally, yes? Your arm? You had one arm tucked underneath mine last night, using my shoulder as a pillow. My wings are the same. They are a part of me and they are strong but flexible. Like your arms or fingers. As long as you do not overextend or bend the wrong way, they adjust with you.”

Jane looked at his wings and ran her fingers along them, eliciting a low groan as he closed his eyes in pleasure. She’d forgotten how sensitive they were. When he opened his eyes again, she could feel the rekindled heat.

Her questions were forgotten as Kiernan trailed his lips down her chest, along her navel, to the junction of her thighs. He settled between her legs and blew softly on her clit. Her whole body shuddered in response. She looked down just in time to watch him look up, grinning like a devil. He licked her, slow but firm, settling in for a few hard licks against her clit. When she was wiggling restlessly and moaning nonstop, he looked up at her again.

She reached out and stroked his wings with both hands, causing him to thrust into the bed sheets. He shook his head and moved up, notching himself at her entrance before looking at her.

“Still yes, Jane?”

Her heart melted. His request for consent was everything. As dominating and alpha as he was, he made sure to get clear consent and it set her on fire.

“Yes, Kiernan,” she moaned back at him. “Please.”

He slid into her heat slowly before pulling out to do it again. He kept up the slow but steady pace, kissing her intermittently the whole time. She ran her hands down his chest, enjoying the ripple of his pectoral muscles as he determinedly pushed her towards climax with long, sure strokes.

Their kisses grew more intense as the heat in her belly expanded. Everything felt tingly and warm. The gentle floral scent of her room faded behind his masculine bergamot and cinnamon scent and she loved it. She loved the way he smelled, spicy in a way that made her want to lick him. She wanted to lick the sweat off his skin before licking his wings. What would that feel like for him?

He liked when she touched his wings. Would it be better with her tongue? She reached up to touch his wings again, intending to pull him close enough for her to try, but the second she touched them, his thrusts stuttered then picked up. She lost her train of thought entirely as he sped up and pushed into her harder and harder. He reached between them and circled her clit with quick movements, as though he needed her to come. He was groaning like he might not last and that was what pushed her over the edge. She loved the idea that he wouldn't be able to hold off. That he found her so sexy he couldn't last another moment.

Their eyes locked onto each other as she reached her peak. She could tell he was there, too, as he she felt him swell impossibly larger.

They came at the same time, still looking into each other's eyes.

She wouldn't say the earth moved. They weren't even on earth, technically, were they? She smiled softly at her own thoughts. It was more like a string had been tied between them. And between last night, their talk, their joining together, and this morning waking in each other's arms, they'd braided the string into a rope. Something solid. Something that might last.

She desperately wanted it to last.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE NEXT WEEK went by in a blink. Kiernan brought Jane everywhere he had to go. She sat beside him as he ran meetings with important people and acted as a sounding board as he discussed laws with his parents. He listened to Jane, making adjustments on proposals, and talked about the things he would change once he became King. She ate lunch with her friends some days and made sure to spend a day shopping with Queen Melody.

They spent their nights in bed. And their evenings. Most mornings, too. Truthfully, it wasn't always in bed, either. Jane felt her feelings growing day by day and wondered if she'd ever want to go back home. Jane felt more and more as though Fairie could become her home.

"Tell me a secret, Kiernan," she said teasingly, laying naked in his arms late one night.

"Do I have any left? I tell you anything you want to know," he said with a lazy grin.

"Just something no one else knows," Jane shrugged.

"If I was not going to be King, I would want to write a story that the entire fae realm could enjoy."

"Really? That's awesome. What would you write about?"

"I am not sure," he mused. "I quite liked your story about Harry Potter. Or Black Beauty. Perhaps I would write a story about our horses overcoming incredible odds with the help of their horns and some handy fae."

"I would read it."

"Tell me a secret, Jane. Something no one else knows."

“No one here knows my full name. I’ve never even asked yours, but I’m sure there are people here who know *your* full name.”

“I am Prince Kiernan Laoch Samhradh. There. Now you know my full name. What is yours?”

“Jane McKenna Winter.”

Kiernan shot up in the bed, causing her to bounce as he dropped her from his arms. She looked up at him in surprise.

“What was that for?”

“Your name is Jane McKenna Winter? You are sure?”

“Am I sure of my own name? Yes, Kiernan. I know my own damn name.”

Kiernan was out of bed in a flash, pulling on the clothes he’d just taken off in a rush.

“What are you doing? Why are you getting dressed?” Jane kept throwing questions at him, but Kiernan looked lost in thought as he corrected the shoes he’d slid on the wrong feet.

He left the room, Jane still trying to untangle her naked body from the covers.

“Kiernan, get back here,” she said in a raised voice so that he could hear her from the other room. “We aren’t doing this again. No more secrets.”

Kiernan was suddenly back in the room, standing still in the door.

“It’s not, I can’t, this isn’t...”

“Spit it out,” Jane said, starting to get annoyed with him while she started pulling on her own clothes. “Now, Kiernan.”

“I don’t want to give you wrong information, Jane. But your name... I think you might be...”

He started to pace in the living room, muttering to himself the whole time.

“..... not possible.... Coincidence?.... maybe.... royal family... must know...”

Jane tried to get him to talk to her, but it was like he couldn't hear her at all. Jane tried again, repeatedly attempting to get him to speak.

Jane's frustration level shot through the roof.

All she could think about was that she couldn't do this again with him. Not after this amazing week together. She couldn't stand it if he went back to keeping secrets from her.

"Kiernan, tell me what's going on this instant," she demanded, at the end of her rope. "You said you wouldn't keep secrets. You said you would let me in. Share things with me. This isn't sharing. Don't do this."

"What? No, Jane, I..."

"Spit it out! Now, Kiernan," she nearly shouted when the silence dragged on for over a minute. Her heart was beating harder because of him keeping this from her when it was *about her*. "You're ruining us. Again. I'm telling you right now that you're *ruining us*. Tell me what's going on. Please."

"I'll tell Mother," he muttered in response.

Jane felt her heart crack at his response. It didn't break, just cracked a little. Enough to make her throw back up all of the walls she used to constantly keep up around her heart. She'd told him. She'd warned him. She'd tried, hadn't she?

He wouldn't tell her what was going on as a result of her telling him *her* name, but he wanted to tell his *mother*? What was he thinking?

Jane left his suite, leaning back against the door after closing it behind her. She waited a moment, but Kiernan didn't come after her. She felt a tear roll down her cheek. It wasn't supposed to be like this again. He had promised to let her in. That he wouldn't keep secrets.

And now he knew something about Jane, but he was telling his mother first? How did that make any sense?

Jane looked up when she heard footsteps coming down the hall and saw Queen Melody rushing towards her.

"What is the matter? Kiernan said it was an emergency."

“I don’t know, Melody,” Jane replied with a sigh. “He freaked out, muttering to himself after I told him my name and wouldn’t tell me anything else.”

“Your name? Is your name not Jane? I don’t understand.”

“I told him my full name: Jane McKenna Winter. And—”

The queen gasped, interrupting Jane’s words.

“Is that true, Jane?” Queen Melody immediately asked. “Your full name is Jane McKenna Winter?”

“Yes...” Jane said slowly, cautiously. But too much was going through her mind and her thoughts turned snarky in her upset. “Is that the sign of the devil in this realm? That’d be my luck. Or no, let me guess. I’m probably the Prophesied One. Is that it? With my name revealed, you’re here to send me on a death-defying quest to open all the portals single-handedly and return the females to the Fae Realm, saving both worlds from imminent destruction.”

A loud laugh burst out of Queen Melody and Jane jumped in surprise. The queen quickly covered her mouth with wide eyes, looking shocked at her own laughter.

“I apologize, truly.” Queen Melody shook her head, a small smile tugging one corner of her lips up as she looked intently at Jane. “But honestly, Jane. Devil’s name? Prophesied One? Where are you getting all of this?”

Jane just shrugged in response.

“No, my dear,” the queen continued softly. “There aren’t any prophecies with your name in them that we’re aware of and your name certainly doesn’t have anything to do with demons or a devil. Cormac and I both caught your last name at our first dinner together and thought it mere coincidence.”

“Why is my name coincidental?”

“Winter is the last name of the royal family for the Winter Court. Well, technically their last name was Geimhreadh which means winter in Irish. Just as Cormac was born Cormac Samhradh, meaning summer, and both of my sons share Samhradh as their last name. It is mine now as well, having

mated into the family. But there have been human families in the past that we've run into with the surname Winter, so I assumed it was coincidence that your name was the American version of Geimhreadh."

"And now you don't?"

"With the middle name McKenna? No, I do not think it coincidence any longer," she responded firmly. "McKenna was the given name of the last Winter Queen of Fairie. She led the fight for equal rights and left with the females many years ago. I think you may be her descendant. That would make you part fae, Jane."

Jane was momentarily frozen in shock. After everything she'd been through, was it possible she was part fae? Was she always meant to be here? This was insanity. She'd allowed herself to believe in a lot, being here, seeing it with her own eyes. But this was beyond everything else. Jane, descended from the Queen of the Winter Court?

"With no wings? That seems unlikely. And I just happened to come through the portal into Fairie? What next? I should go claim my great-grandmother's throne?"

"Of course not," she chided gently. "Without wings or access to magic, Fairie wouldn't recognize you as Winter Queen. It is important because it might explain *why the portal opened for you at all*. It was reacting to your Fae-ness with your royal blood being the missing ingredient needed. We need to talk to Cormac. Immediately."

Jane paused, thinking about Kiernan. Should she get him? But why would she when he should have told her? Why didn't he tell her?

Her thoughts were a mess, swirling with the idea of being part fae, descended from fairy royalty. But they also swirled with her feelings for Kiernan. They were strong, but she didn't know what to do about him being unable to tell her about her own name and deciding to tell his mother first. She didn't want to be shut out and shut down again.

Just like that, she decided he could wait. Maybe, *maybe* he was just overwhelmed and they could talk this through. She could see how this might be overwhelming. But he'd made her wait and she could certainly do the same in return as she got answers about her own name.

"Let's go find the king, then," Jane said with a firm nod.

The queen looked at the door behind Jane wistfully before leading the way. They only went down a single hallway before turning right and stopping in front of a large set of wooden double doors. The queen opened the door and Jane saw King Cormac sitting in an oversized leather-looking brown chair in a large, elegant living room. His eyebrows rose when he saw Jane before tilting his head in question to his queen.

"Jane's full name is Jane McKenna Winter," the queen started without preamble.

The king sat up straight in surprise, mouth falling open.

"The Winter Queen..." The king whispered the phrase in awe.

"I was thinking a descendant," the queen said, amused. "I doubt very much that we are standing in the room with McKenna Geimhreadh herself, Queen of the Winter Court. She would have had to grow younger in the human realm and that's not possible."

"No, of course that isn't Queen McKenna," the king mumbled, shaking his head like he was seeing a ghost in front of him.

"I thought it might help explain why she was able to create and come through a portal to our realm," the queen stated calmly.

"Yes, of course," the king mumbled, still shaking his head.

"Focus, Dearest," the queen said, smiling at her husband. "I thought she might be needed to find or reopen the portal to her home."

Home. Jane froze at the word home. Where was her home? Was it back in New York, alone, friendless, spending her time

waitressing just to make ends meet, and not always doing so successfully? Was it with Kiernan? Over the last week, she'd started to think maybe it was. But he'd done it again. She didn't want to yo-yo back and forth, wondering if he would tell her things or wait until he thought she was ready to hear them. He should trust her enough to share possibilities with her, right?

"That is a wise thought, my Queen," the king nodded. "If she is amenable, we should escort her to the portal."

"I was going to go last week with Roarke," Jane commented, "and Seamus, Daire, and Finn, but Kiernan came by and it just didn't come up again. I think I should go, though."

And she did think she should go. At a minimum, she wanted to know if she could open it. If home was even a possibility. Maybe if things hadn't gone as they had this morning, she'd be telling Kiernan about it. Or bringing Kiernan with her, more likely. But that isn't how things had gone and she needed to not see him right this moment.

"Yes, if we could find other descendants, it could change everything for us," the king stated. "Of course you do not have to stay, but if you decide to remain, perhaps you and Kiernan could spearhead the project. Find the others."

Jane looked down. She didn't want to sign on for a project with Kiernan that had no end date. She was almost halfway through her time with him and her feelings were a jumbled mess.

The queen must have sensed her unease, because she sent Jane a sad smile.

"You could spearhead the project with Roarke, as well," she said softly.

The king looked from the queen to Jane and back again, confused at her words. He seemed to pick up on the tension, though, because he nodded and agreed.

"How about we send you with Roarke now before it starts to get dark out?"

Jane agreed and a few minutes later she met up with Roarke and all of their friends at the castle entrance for a second attempt at going out to the portal. They headed out the doors, walking back the same path she'd walked weeks ago when she first arrived in this realm.

“Are we going for real this time?” Finn asked the group with a grin.

“Something has changed,” Seamus said, squinting at Jane in confusion.

Jane looked at everyone and took a deep breath.

“My full name is Jane McKenna Winter and King Cormac and Queen Melody think I'm a descendant of the Winter Queen and that is how I was able to open the portal in the first place. They think it might also be why no one has been able to reopen it.”

It was almost comical to see everyone's expressions shift. Roarke's eyes widened, Seamus jerked back like he'd been slapped, Finn kept closing and reopening his mouth without speaking, but Daire was her favorite. Daire's eyes were wide and he kept repeating the same phrase over and over again as he scratched the back of his head in confusion.

“That's not possible. That's not possible. No way. That's not possible.”

Daire repeated those phrases until she put both of her hands on his shoulders, centering him back with the group.

“I guess it makes sense,” Roarke said slowly.

“Makes sense?” Jane asked.

“Yes, it makes sense why you fit in here so easily. Made friends so easily. You've been like a missing puzzle piece finally found the whole time we've known you, Jane,” Roarke said. “Because you belong here. With us. And I think, with Kiernan.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

DID SHE BELONG here?

“Maybe,” Jane replied. She didn’t know how to answer that. Yes, she felt like she belonged here, that was true enough, she finally fully admitted to herself. With Kiernan? Maybe. As they walked, she thought about opening the portal. She imagined bringing other women, maybe even other women like her with no family and a dead-end job where they were barely making it, over to the fae realm. Where they’d have a chance at a new life.

And a chance with an amazing man like Roarke. Or Seamus, Finn, or Daire. That was something to try and work towards, wasn’t it? Taking Kiernan out of the equation entirely, she still wanted to get the portal open no matter what and see if others might want to come here and start a new life.

The group stayed quiet for the remainder of the walk, finally arriving at a vaguely familiar clearing surrounded by forrest, filled with a group of twelve men.

She thought the men looked incredibly odd, holding their hands up, palms out as they walked around as if to avoid walking into invisible walls. They were all muttering softly under their breath, as well. Strange.

“You lot look like a bunch of fools,” Finn commented, making Seamus and Jane both laugh out loud.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking, too,” Jane said, shrugging while still chuckling.

“Me, as well,” Seamus added.

“I was thinking it, but I wouldn’t have said it,” Daire stated.

“You know what they’re doing,” Roarke added, shaking his head at his friends and Jane.

“Doesn’t make it look any less strange,” Finn responded with a shrug.

Roarke called for everyone’s attention and explained the current theory, that Jane might be a descendant of Queen McKenna and it was possible that she was needed to open the portal.

Roarke introduced Jane to Eoghan, an average-looking older man who had a sharply pointed nose, brown eyes, medium brown hair, and dark green wings. Eoghan was the most knowledgeable fae in regards to portals and portal magic. When he’d heard the theory about her family lineage, he’d grown excited and couldn’t seem to stop shifting his weight from his heels to his toes.

Eoghan had Jane pick a spot she thought might be where she portalled through from her home realm. Jane didn’t know where that might be, so she picked a random spot and hoped that would be good enough. There was too much confusion and too much time had passed. Eoghan instructed everyone to hold hands, creating a large circle around the spot Jane had chosen.

Eoghan instructed everyone to visualize the portal in their mind as best they could and told the other portal-seekers from the castle to chant the words that had always been used to open portals. Jane felt slightly silly, almost as though she was at a seance, holding hands with a group of people while they chanted and she used her inner eye to visualize a portal she couldn’t remember ever actually seeing.

Ridiculous.

A few minutes into it, she couldn’t stop her mind from wandering back to Kiernan. What if the portal worked and they could open it permanently? If it worked like a doorway that she could travel through, would she go home for a while? She was frustrated with how Kiernan reverted back to keeping silent on things after only a week. At the same time, it was an incredible, magical week.

She thought through their dates, the places they saw together and even the meetings they attended together. They'd been a team. A real partnership. She thought about their nights together. And mornings. So hot and she didn't think she'd ever get tired of seeing him naked. Then she thought about their conversations, talking about everything and anything.

He hadn't held himself back. Anything she'd asked, he'd answered or discussed with her. Is it possible that he wasn't withholding this time, but in genuine shock? He'd been letting her in and sharing his life. She had started to think that maybe she... well, she felt like she had strong feelings for him. That they were growing.

There had been a pull, a connection, that she'd felt between herself and Kiernan right from the start. Over the past weeks, it had only grown stronger. If she was honest, she felt the pull even now with her hurt feelings.

She shut out the muttering around her and dug deep into her heart, pinpointing the connection she'd felt with Kiernan. It was like a pulsing in her heart, in her soul, that flew outwards and started to shift into something else. Feelings that didn't feel like her own. Panic, worry, grief. Why was she feeling those feelings? When the grief bounced back along the connection to her heart, she recognized its source.

She was feeling Kiernan's feelings. She was feeling *his* panic, worry, and grief. Was he okay? Why was he feeling those things? The panic and worry grew as she began to experience them herself in her concern for Kiernan.

She was ready to drop her hands from the circle and run to find Kiernan. In that moment, nothing else mattered. It didn't matter if the portal wouldn't open. It didn't matter if she couldn't get back home. It didn't matter that Kiernan hadn't immediately told her about her possible lineage. She was ready to admit she had *probably* overreacted and he was *probably* in shock with the way he reacted. He may not have given too much thought to her last name. He'd liked her from the first moment, before he knew she could be royalty.

The only thing that mattered was making sure that Kiernan was okay.

Because she loved him. She sucked in a breath, surprised at her own thought.

Then the world tilted. She lost control of her own body for a moment, dropping the hands she'd been holding and falling to her knees as her center of gravity moved. If she hadn't been on her knees, she would have fallen on her back due to the weight there.

She heard gasps and murmurs of surprise from all around her. She opened her eyes when the world stopped spinning and saw every single person in the circle looking at her with their jaws dropped and eyes wide. She started to freak out at everyone's expression and ended up focusing on Roarke, trusting him to tell her what had happened.

"You have wings, Jane," he whispered, "and they are absolutely breathtaking."

"I have wings?" She couldn't comprehend what he had said. She reached behind her, feeling the halter top and open back, feeling skin until her fingers touched firm satin. She jerked her fingers back, and felt the air displacement from her wings moving along with her fingers.

Holy shit.

He nodded at her question, eyes still wide open.

"They are ultra-light gray and look like they have snowflakes and shooting stars sparkling throughout them."

"They are beautiful, Jane," Daire said sincerely.

"I really am a descendant of Queen McKenna," she breathed. "I'm a fairy."

"You are indeed of the fae," Roarke agreed with a soft smile.

Roarke cleared his throat before looking again at her wings and speaking slowly.

"And I think you may be—"

“JANE! DON’T GO, JANE. PLEASE WAIT.”

She heard stumbling on the ground behind her, but couldn’t turn around without falling over. Finn walked over to try and help her to her feet, but she still felt a little unsteady, so she ignored his outstretched hand.

“Nooooo,” Kiernan moaned, sounding as though he was dying inside. She recognized Kiernan’s voice as he came up behind her. He started spitting out his thoughts, sounding devastated and broken. “You got it open then? The portal? And what happened, it closed after she went through? Jane isn’t here anymore, just the fae. All wings, no humans. No more Jane. She went home. Because I am an absolute idiot who could not untie his tongue quickly enough.”

Jane felt the crack in her heart start to repair itself with each word out of his mouth. It was shock. He wasn’t keeping things from her. He took her and their relationship seriously. He’d come all this way to stop her from going back to New York because he thought she would leave him.

She should have talked to him. She felt terrible just hearing his pain. If she’d at least sent him a message on a crystal, he wouldn’t be so devastated. She wobbled as she tried to stand, to turn to him, to talk to him.

“I’ve lost her,” he whispered, voice cracking on the words, just loud enough for her to hear. “I lost my fated mate.”

What? Fated mate?

“Your fated mate? You think you have a fate bond with Jane?”

Jane didn’t even know who had spoken, but they’d pretty much said exactly what was in her own head.

Roarke stood and stopped behind her, going to his brother.

“Why do you think Jane is your fated mate?” She knew Roarke had asked the question, she recognized his voice. He was standing right behind her, covering her from Kiernan’s view. She didn’t know why.

“My wings changed, Roarke,” he said, choking up. “I went to find Mother and when she told me that Jane had come here to open the portal, I came as quickly as I could. Thinking I could lose her forever, that she would think I was keeping things from her again and decide to go back to her home, I realized that I love her. I love her, Roarke. I came as fast as I could, but she’s... she’s gone. I was too late. When I turned the corner and saw nothing but fae with wings, I knew I was too late.”

Jane heard his shuddering breaths break the silence as no one else spoke. She was too choked up to speak, but knew she needed to. She needed to let him know she was right here. She took deep breaths, trying to get herself under control enough at least to speak since she couldn’t turn to him when he needed her.

“We have to figure out how to open the portal,” he begged, “I need to talk to her. I need to tell her I love her. If she wants to stay there, I’ll abdicate. You could become a great king, Roarke. I can abdicate, but I can not lose Jane. *I need her.*”

Jane took another deep breath before finally having enough control to speak through the tears she had streaming down her cheeks. He loved her. They were fated mates. They had a Fate Bond. Jane felt like she was bursting with joy. She loved him and he loved her. Even fate agreed they should be together. She had a home. A new family. Someone to be her other half. Everything she ever wanted and more that she didn’t know to want.

“I’m right here, Kiernan. Don’t you recognize your new wings?”

She heard Kiernan’s sharp inhale and then he was pushing Roarke aside and standing right behind her.

“You have wings, Jane!”

“Brilliant deduction, Scooby,” she said, chuckling through her tears at his speaking the very obvious.

“What did she say? Who is Scooty?” Finn asked, trying to be quiet but failing.

“But... you have wings, Jane,” he repeated inanely. Did he think they could be fated mates, and his wings would change and hers wouldn’t? Wait. How did it work with humans in the past? She tucked that question away for later, knowing it would need an answer.

“Yeah. We all noticed the new wings, Scooty,” Finn smarted to Kiernan, making Jane laugh.

“They’re so beautiful, my Jane, my Fate Bonded,” Kiernan whispered to her, standing stock-still behind her and not moving. She could feel the weight of his gaze on her wings and it made her want to flutter them at him like they were eyelashes. She wanted to preen. She’d never had wings before, but liked the idea that they were blended from Kiernan’s gorgeous wings.

“I’m glad you think so,” Jane said, trying to see him over her shoulder, “because I’m assuming yours are the same.”

“They are,” he said, smiling as tears fell down his cheeks as he came around and kneeled in front of her.

She gasped before reaching towards his wings. She stopped at the last second, not wanting everyone to witness his reaction to her touch on his wings. But, oh, wow. The wings were beautiful. *Her* wings were beautiful. She just didn’t know what this all meant. Her lineage. This Fate Bond. She tried to remember what she’d heard about it, but came up blank with everything going on.

Kiernan leaned forward and kissed her gently, causing her eyes to flutter shut in contentment. As he leaned away, she breathed in his scent and her eyes flew open in surprise.

“You smell like blueberry muffins and library books and cedar,” she said in wonder.

“Well that is a bit late,” he said with a smile. “I had forgotten the scent of our Fate Bonds adjust to smell like our favorite scent. But you’ve always smelled like mine.”

“I have?”

“You smell like sparkling kiseo juice. Bright and fresh and like sunshine, with a hint of tartness that makes my mouth

water. Thank you for deciding not to go, my Jane.”

“We didn’t even get it open, K,” Roarke said wryly, running a hand through his hair.

“But I bet you could now,” Kiernan answered, musing aloud. “The theory is sound with her lineage. And now that Jane has access to her magic... Jane, you have access to magic. I wonder what you will specialize in.”

Jane’s brain seemed to short out. Fate Bond. Wings. Portal. Magic. It was too much. It was wonderful, but too much.

“Focus,” Daire said. “This is our only chance to find our own mates. Jane, can you try again?”

“Of course,” Jane answered. She’d do whatever it took to help her friends. She could help them find their own Fate Bonds. For someone like her, that had never felt like she had a purpose in life beyond survival, she was finding out so much. She was descended from a queen of the fae. She was bonded to a prince she loved that loved her in return. And with her help, they might be able to find other men their own mates.

“But you will not go through, right?” Kiernan asked, sounding a little worried.

“No, my place is here with you. Perhaps we can work on finding others, though. Together. Your mother suggested it for us and I think it’s a good idea.”

“So do I, Jane,” he said with a smile. “So let’s get it open.”

He stood in the circle next to Jane as everyone joined hands. It only took a moment and Jane felt... something. A rushing, buzzing, something. When she opened her eyes, she saw a flash and then a sparkling, bright circle that looked like an enormous wet mirror in the center. This had to be the portal.

They’d done it. They’d actually done it.

“What now?” Daire asked, looking wide-eyed at the portal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

TWO MONTHS LATER, Jane and Kiernan were snuggled in their private study, looking over the list of names they'd put together. Jane was in Kiernan's lap, sitting in a large leather chair. He was rubbing her shoulder, occasionally brushing one fingertip along her sensitive wings, causing her to shiver.

"My body needs a rest after an hour ago," she whispered in his ear. "Are you in need of some relief?"

Kiernan groaned at her teasing.

"I do not think I could rise to the occasion, my mate," Kiernan chuckled. "Three climaxes in one morning is more than I would have imagined possible for myself."

Jane smiled. Yes, she thoroughly enjoyed ensuring his satisfaction. As he did for her. He may have had three climaxes, but she'd had too many to count. He was an extremely giving lover.

Since they'd opened— and then closed— the portal, Jane and Kiernan had gone through the entire Winter Court castle records and followed lineages as far as they could, gathering names of anyone who'd left Fairie. They did the same with the Summer Court's records. They had a substantial list now and were ready to start working in the human realm.

Jane had been working diligently with her magic and it turned out she had a talent for glamour. The plan was for Jane to glamour her and Kiernan's wings so they could search the human realm for other descendants that might want to come home to Fairie. Yes, Kiernan could glamour his own wings, but her glamour felt effortless while it took more energy for him to do the same. They thought it a result of her lineage.

Part of Jane felt responsible for bringing home some of the other female fairies. Searching the records had confirmed Jane's lineage. She'd been informally recognized as Queen of the Winter Court by all of the summer court royals, but discussions had led them all to agree not to keep the courts separate. Jane and Kiernan were Fate Bonds. There was no breaking up or divorce. They decided separately, as rulers, but also together, as a bonded team, that it was in the best interest of the entire fae realm to have one royal family. And Jane had already felt like the summer court royals were her family. She grew closer to them every day, feeling more and more at home here.

For Jane, Fairie was home now. Wherever Kiernan was, really, was her home. They'd spent the first week after discovering their Fate Bond in bed. It had been so long since a Fate Bond had activated, that no one could tell them how the bond would take over and make it nearly impossible to keep their hands off each other. They had a lead on a book in the Winter Court, though, that might explain more in detail. She hoped it would pan out.

Not that Jane was complaining. She loved it. She loved how he smelled like her favorite things rolled into one sexy, incredible man. She loved how she could sense his feelings, knowing how to comfort him or allow him a moment to collect himself when he got overwhelmed or shorted out in surprise at some of the new tricks she could do. She just loved him. And he loved her. Jane felt warm and fuzzy every time she thought about it and how their wings matched, telling every person at a glance that Kiernan was hers. That they belonged together.

Jane and Kiernan were in the last stages of their plan. She'd even practiced glamouring paper, so they'd have the money needed to make it in the human realm. She wasn't sure how long she'd been gone or what the state of things might be.

If she'd been gone too long, they might have assumed her dead. She had no idea if there was a time difference between the realms and no one could tell her because it had been so long since they'd been open. She hoped against hope that they might be able to track down some of her mementos from her

family. She'd like to have those back. There wasn't anything else for her, though. Not really.

She knew enough about the human realm that they could move easily as long as they had the funds. Kiernan's magic could create paper. Her glamour could make it any denomination needed.

Kiernan had spent weeks working with her on magical basics, making sure she learned as much as possible. Jane had spent weeks working with Kiernan on the human realm and advancements none of the fairies knew. She needed him to be able to blend. She thought they were finally ready and they'd planned to leave for the human realm in less than a week.

Roarke rushed into the study, startling Jane and Kiernan both.

"There's a.. you have to come, Jane..."

"What?" Jane snapped impatiently at Roarke. Good gracious, she *hated* when people couldn't spit out their thoughts. Didn't they all know that by now?

"JANE. We need you!"

Jane stood and hurried over to Roarke, worried at his shouting.

"Roarke, I'm right here, what do you need?"

"There's another, Jane. Another female came through where you did. We found her. Jane, she's not like you, she's not from your New York. She's from Kenzass. She said something about not being in Kenzass anymore. Then she looked around like somebody was missing before seeing only us. Me, Seamus, and Finn. She saw Daire and started hyperventilating and passed out. We carried her here and she hasn't woken up yet. Please come. Please come now before she wakes up. You'll know what to say."

"Of course I'll come, Roarke," she answered calmly, trying to help calm him down. "Show me where she is."

Jane and Kiernan followed Roarke down the hall and into the medical wing. In one of the rooms, asleep on the bed, was

a beautiful woman. Long, blonde curls and thick, dark eyelashes over pale, pale skin and a pink bow-shaped mouth. She looked ethereal. She looked like she should have wings already.

Other than her clothes, at least. She was wearing yoga pants and a t-shirt with sneakers, like she'd been jogging. At least Jane didn't notice any injuries. Jane wasn't a doctor, but she seemed fine physically.

Suddenly, the woman's eyes opened wide, moving around the room, pausing on each person's wings. She looked all the way around, definitely seeming as though she was searching for someone. Then she started screaming.

Jane moved closer and booped the girl on the nose.

"None of that," Jane said calmly after the woman fell quiet in surprise. "I'm Jane and you're not crazy. I can tell you what's going on, but you need to know you aren't crazy, okay? Not. Crazy. And no one here will hurt you. You're completely safe, I swear it on my Grammy's grave. What's your name, blondie?"

The girl looked around the room again before seeming to come to a decision. She breathed in and out, slowing with each breath until she calmed enough to speak.

"My name is Sarah. Sarah Pine."

Jane took a single moment to run through the list she'd created with Kiernan, but only needed that one moment. Pine was on the list.

Another fae descendant had fallen into Fairie.

STAY IN TOUCH

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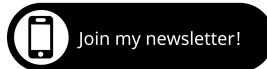
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P.S. If you found an error or want to chat (I'd love to hear from you!) please drop me a line at katrinavinentbooks@gmail.com

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katrina Vincent lives in North Carolina with her husband, two daughters, and her dog Cookie. She loves bubble baths, cookies, hot books in cold weather and spends her days creating fantastical dream worlds filled with fated love between sassy heroines and the men who adore them.